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**A Keystone of Contention:
the Earldom of Ross, 1215-1517**

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B.S

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

The earldom of Ross was a dominant force in medieval Scotland. This was primarily due to its strategic importance as the northern gateway into the Hebrides to the west, and Caithness and Sutherland to the north. The power derived from the earldom's strategic situation was enhanced by the status of its earls. From 1215 to 1372 the earldom was ruled by an uninterrupted MacTaggart comital dynasty which was able to capitalise on this longevity to establish itself as an indispensable authority in Scotland north of the Forth. By the fifteenth century the earldom had passed to an equally powerful dynasty, the MacDonald lords of the Isles, and became a part of one of the most powerful regional hegemonies of medieval Scotland.

The earldom and the power of its earls are acknowledged by most scholars, yet it remains a relatively under-analysed subject, as scholarship tends to gravitate towards viewing Ross through the MacDonald lordship of the Isles, or through the Scottish kings. This has led to Ross being treated as a secondary subject. Moreover, little has been done to compare the two principal dynasties that ruled the earldom and explore issues of continuity between the two.

This thesis will study Ross through the comital dynasties that ruled it and the important local magnates within it, and will provide a Ross-centred platform from which to analyse the political development of the earldom. The thesis will also address issues of continuity, beginning with the origins of the Mac ant t-sagairt earldom and trace its political evolution until the MacDonald claim to Ross was finally extinguished in the early sixteenth century. This thesis will be the first long duree study of this Scottish earldom, and will increase our understanding of Ross and its earls who were so vital to Scotland's medieval history.

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Table I: The Earls of Ross

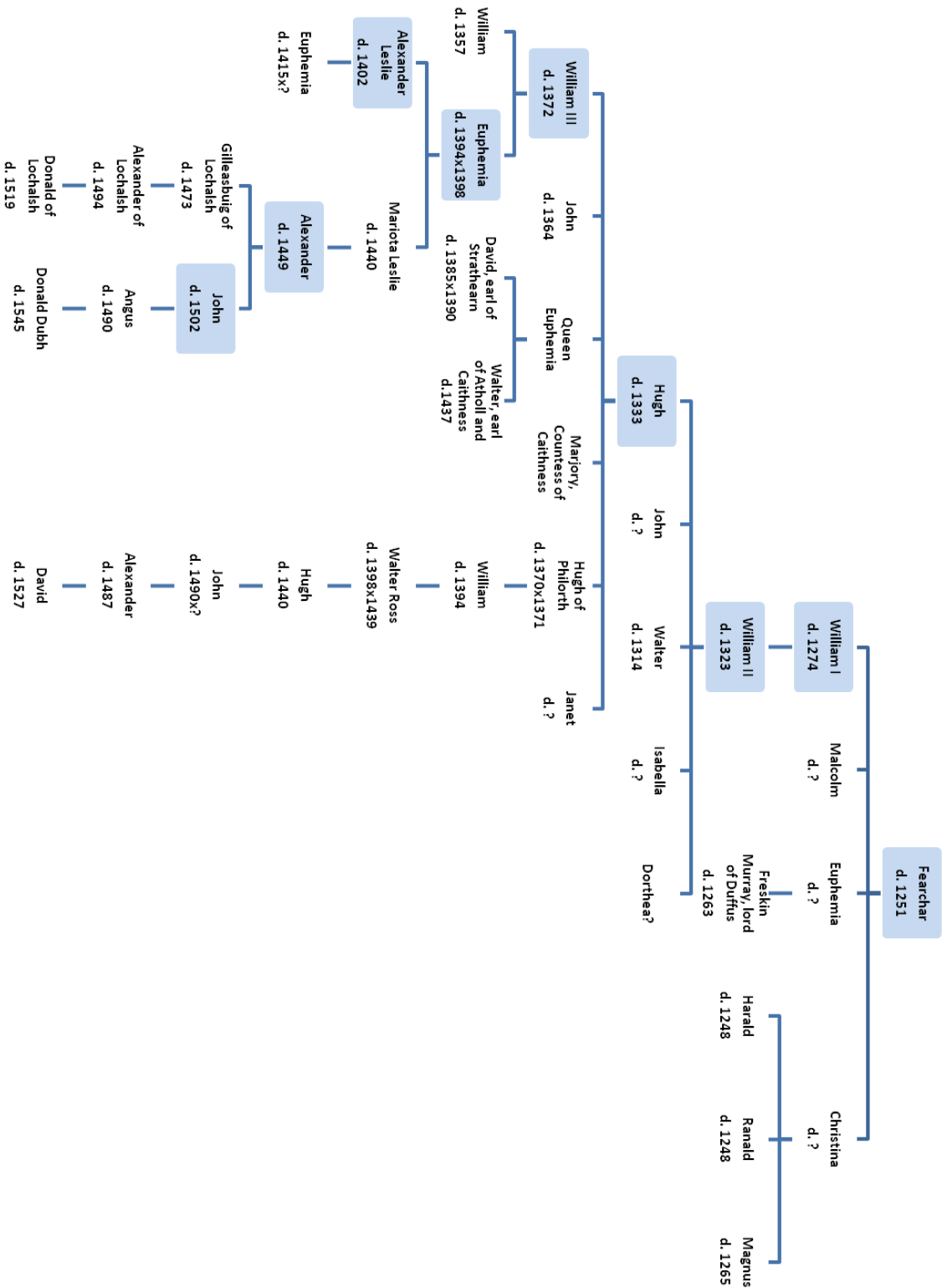
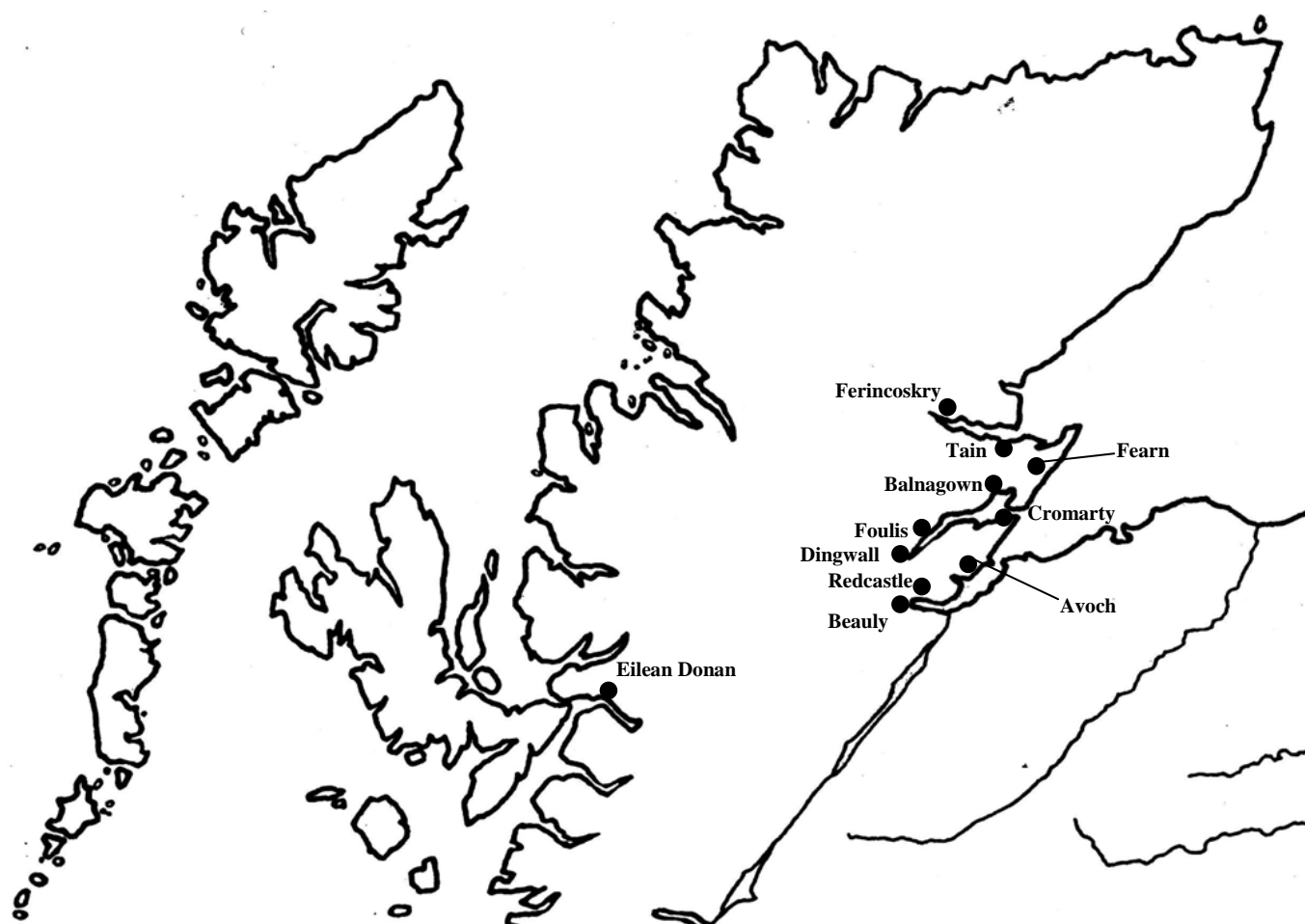


Figure I: Place-names of the Earldom



Acknowledgements

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own composition and the result of my own work. It was not undertaken in collaboration with any other student or researcher. It has not been, and will not be, presented for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or at any other institution.

David Kyle Cochran-Yu

Abbreviations

<i>Abdn. Reg.</i>	<i>Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis</i> , Spalding and Maitland Clubs, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1845).
<i>A.B. Ill.</i>	<i>Illustrations of the Topography and Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff</i> , 4 vols. (Spalding Club, 1847-1869).
<i>A.D.C.P.</i>	<i>The Acts of the Lords of Council in Public Affairs 1501-1554: Selections from Acta Dominorum Concilii</i> , ed. R. K. Hannay (Edinburgh, 1932).
<i>A.L.I.</i>	<i>Acts of the Lords of the Isles, 1336-1493</i> , ed. Jean Munro and R.W. Munro, Scottish History Society (Edinburgh, 1986).
<i>Arb. Lib.</i>	<i>Liber S. Thome de Aberbrothoc</i> , 2 vols. (Bannatyne Club, 1848-56).
<i>Auchinleck Chronicle</i>	‘The Auchinleck Chronicle’ in Christine McGladdery, <i>James II</i> , (Edinburgh, 1990) Appendix 2, 160-173.
<i>Beaully Chrs.</i>	<i>The Charters of the Priory of Beaully</i> , ed. Edmund Chisholm Batten, Grampian Club (Edinburgh, 1877).
Bellenden, <i>Chronicles</i> (1821)	<i>The History and Chronicles of Scotland</i> , written in Latin by Hector Boece and translated by John Bellenden (Edinburgh, 1821).
Black, <i>Surnames</i>	Black, George F., <i>The Surnames of Scotland</i> (New York, 1946).
Buchanan, <i>History</i>	George Buchanan, <i>The History of Scotland</i> , translated James Aikman, 4 vols. (Glasgow and Edinburgh, 1827-1829).
<i>Calendar of Fearn</i>	<i>The Calendar of Fearn: text and additions, 1471-1667</i> , ed. R.J. Adam (Edinburgh, 1992).
<i>Cawdor Bk.</i>	<i>The Book of the Thanes of Cawdor</i> , ed. C. Innes, Spalding Club (Aberdeen, 1859).
<i>C.D.S.</i>	<i>Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland</i> , ed. J. Bain, 5 vols. (Edinburgh, 1881-1888).
<i>Chron. Lanercost</i> (Maxwell)	<i>The Chronicle of Lanercost 1272-1346</i> , Translated by H. Maxwell (Glasgow, 1913).

<i>Chron. Man</i>	<i>Cronica Regum Mannie et Insularum: Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles</i> , ed. George Broderick, (Manx National Heritage, 2004).
<i>Chron. Melrose</i>	<i>The Chronicle of Melrose</i> (Facsimile Edition), ed. A.O. Anderson and others (London, 1936).
<i>Chron. Ross</i>	<i>Ane Breve Cronicle Of The Earlis Of Ross</i> , ed. W.R. Baillie (Edinburgh, 1850).
<i>Clan Donald</i>	MacDonald, A., and MacDonald A., <i>The Clan Donald</i> , 3 vols. (Inverness, 1896-1904).
<i>Coll. de Rebus Alban.</i>	<i>Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis</i> (Iona Club, 1847).
<i>C.P.L.</i>	<i>Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters</i> , ed. W.H. Bliss and others (London, 1893-).
<i>C.S.S.R.</i>	<i>Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome</i> , ed. A.I. Dunlop and others, 5 vols., vols. i-iii (Scottish History Society 1934-97); vol. iv-v (Glasgow, 1983-1997).
<i>E.R.</i>	<i>Exchequer Rolls of Scotland</i> , ed. J. Stuart and others, 23 vols. (Edinburgh, 1878-1908).
<i>E.S.</i>	<i>Early Sources of Scottish History: A.D. 500 to 1286</i> , ed. Alan Orr Anderson, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1922; reprint Stamford, 1990).
<i>Familie of Innes</i>	<i>Ane Account of the Familie of Innes</i> (Spalding Club, 1864).
<i>Family of Rose</i>	<i>A Genealogical Deduction of the Family of Rose of Kilravock</i> , ed. C. Innes, Spalding Club (Aberdeen, 1848).
<i>Foedera</i>	<i>Foedera, conventiones, litterae, et cujuscunque generis acta publica</i> , ed. Thomas Rymer, 4 vols. (London, 1816-1869).
<i>Foedera (O)</i>	<i>Foedera, conventiones, litterae, et cujuscunque generis acta publica</i> , ed. Thomas Rymer, Original edition, 20 vols. (London, 1704-1735).
<i>Fraser, Cromartie</i>	William Fraser, <i>The Earls of Cromartie</i> , 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1876).
<i>Fraser, Lennox</i>	William Fraser, <i>The Lennox</i> , 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1874)

- Fraser, *Sutherland* Sir William Fraser, *The Sutherland Book*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1892).
- Gordon, *Sutherland* Sir Robert Gordon, *A Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland, from its Origin to the Year 1630; with a Continuation to the Year 1651*, (Edinburgh, 1813).
- Gregory, *History* Donald Gregory, *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*, 2nd edition, (London and Glasgow, 1881).
- H.P.* *Highland Papers*, ed. J.R.N. MacPhail, 4 vols., (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1914-1934).
- Hunt, 'Albany' Karen J. Hunt, 'The Governorship of the First Duke of Albany: 1406-1420' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1998).
- Invernessiana* Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, *Invernessiana: contributions towards a history of the town & parish of Inverness from 1160 to 1599* (Inverness, 1875).
- Inchaffray Liber* *Liber Insule Missarum* (Bannatyne Club, 1847).
- Major, *History* John Major, *A History of Greater Britain* (Scottish History Society, 1892).
- Moray Reg.* *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis*, (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club 1837).
- Munro Tree* *The Munro Tree: A genealogy and Chronology of the Munros of Foulis and other Families of the Clan; A Manuscript Compiled in 1734*, ed. R.W. Munro, (Edinburgh: 1978).
- Munro Writs* *Calendar of Writs of Munro of Foulis, 1299-1843*, ed. C.T. McInnes (SRS, Edinburgh, 1940).
- NRS* *National Records of Scotland*
- O.P.S.* *Origines Parochiales Scotiae*, Bannatyne Club, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1851-1855).
- Orkney Recs.* *Records of the Earldom of Orkney, 1299-1614*, Scottish History Society (Edinburgh, 1914).
- Pitscottie, *Historie* Robert Lindesay of Pitscottie, *The Historie and Cronicles of Scotland*, 3 vols. (Scottish Text Society, 1899-1911).
- PoMS* Amanda Beam, John Bradley, Dauvit Broun, John Reuben Davies, Mathew Hammond, Michele Pasin

- (with others), *The People of Medieval Scotland, 1093-1314* (Glasgow and London, 2012)
www.poms.ac.uk.
- Reliquiae Celticae* *Reliquiae Celticae*, ed. Alexander MacBain and John Kennedy, 2 vols. (Inverness, 1892-1894)
- R.M.S.* *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scottorum*, ed. J.M. Thomson and others (Edinburgh: 1882-1914).
- Rotuli Scotiae* *Rotuli Scotiae in Turri Londinensi et in Domo Capitulari Westmonasteriensi Asservati*, 2 vols, (London: Record Commission, 1814-19).
- RPS* *The Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707*, K.M. Brown et al (eds) (St. Andrews, 2007- 2013), <http://www.rps.ac.uk>.
- R.R.S.* *Regesta Regum Scottorum*, ed. G.W.S. Barrow and others, 5 vols. (Edinburgh:1960-).
- R.S.S.* *Registrum Secreti Sigillii Regum Scottorum*, ed. M. Livingstone and others, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1908-1963).
- Scotichronicon* Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, ed. DER Watt, 9 vols. (Aberdeen, 1987-1998).
- S.P.* Paul, J.B., ed., *The Scots Peerage*, 9 vols. (Edinburgh, 1904-14).
- Stevenson, Documents* *Documents Illustrative of the History of Scotland From the Death of Alexander the Third to the Accession of Robert Bruce 1286-1306*, ed. Joseph Stevenson, 2 Vols. (Edinburgh, 1870).
- T.A.* *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, ed. T. Dickson and Sir J. Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1877-1916).
- TNA* The National Archives: Kew
- Wardlaw* James Fraser, *Chronicles Of The Frasers The Wardlaw Manuscript Entitled 'Polichronicon Seu Policratica Temporum, Or, The True Genealogy Of The Frasers. ' 916-1674*, ed. William Mackay, Scottish History Society (Edinburgh, 1905).
- Watt, Fasti* *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae Medii Aevi Ad Annum 1638*, ed. D.E.R. Watt and A.L. Murray, Revised Edition (Edinburgh, 2003).

Notes Regarding Nomenclature

The choice of nomenclature for this thesis was a difficult decision. Existing evidence indicates that Gaelic was prevalent in Ross; the first earl of Ross does after all appear with the Gaelic name, Fearchar mac an t-sagairt. With the earldom's proximity and connections with the Hebrides, and the amalgamation of the earldom into the wider lordship of the Isles, the relationship to Gaelic is strengthened. Because of this, Gaelic namings of local battles and events will be used. However, there is no contemporary evidence that Fearchar's descendents remained rooted in Gaelic; indeed all other names from this dynasty appear exclusively non-Gaelic in form, predominately in Latin and French which scholarship has uniformly translated into modern English. This appears consistent with the patterns seen in local kindreds of Ross, and the neighbouring regions in which the earls of Ross were most active in the late medieval period. Indeed, it seems superficial to assign Gaelic forms to popular Ross names such as Euphemia or Walter, or to the personal names of close allies and enemies neighbouring Ross like the Comyns or Douglasses. Despite their clear association with Gaelic, most contemporary documents of the lords of the Isles as earls of Ross continue to follow this pattern, perhaps most famously exemplified by the Gaelic name 'Gilleasbuig' consistently appearing in Latin as *Celestinus*. Furthermore, as this thesis aspires to follow in the footsteps of noted current Scottish political historians Stephen Boardman, Michael Brown, Michael Penman, Karen Hunt, and others who have chosen a pattern that is generally consistent with using anglicised forenames and surnames, it became advisable to continue along these lines for the sake of consistency. For these reasons, unless otherwise noted, accepted anglicised forenames will be utilised while surnames will appear in the established anglicised forms as found in Black's *Surnames*. The Gaelic surname 'MacRuairidh' is noteworthy for the wide range of anglicised variations it has produced. This thesis will use the form 'MacRuari' which has been utilised by Scottish political historians like Stephen Boardman.

A particular note should be made in reference to the Gaelic patronymic 'mac an t-sagairt', because of its connection to the dynasty that ruled the earldom of Ross from 1215 to 1372. There is no existing evidence that this patronymic ever became used as a surname for the earls of Ross, yet it remains the sole link to deriving a surname for the dynasty that would produce five generations of earls and kindred that through a cadet branch would later be known as Clan Ross. In order to designate and distinguish this comital dynasty as a coherent family, and explore issues of dynastic continuity, the anglicised 'MacTaggart' will be adopted in this thesis.

Introduction

The political landscape of northern Scotland from 1215 to 1475 was dominated by the earldom of Ross. From the early thirteenth century a comital dynasty, founded by Fearchar mac an t-sagairt [Farquhar MacTaggart], flourished for nearly two centuries under various kings of Scots. The earldom was situated precariously between various waxing and waning powers: to the north the influential earls of Orkney; to the west the kingdom of Man and the MacDonald lordship of the Isles; and to the southeast the Scottish kings. The power of Ross continued to accumulate, provoking royal apprehension and a desire by successive governments to bring it within royal control. Yet the earldom continued to elude royal efforts at domination and in the fifteenth century became a major part of the MacDonald hegemony until the imposition of royal forfeiture in 1475.

Despite the importance of the earldom of Ross, relatively little is known about its development and few academic works have sought to investigate its political evolution. To date, studies have treated the earldom of Ross in four ways: as a means to produce genealogical and clan histories, as a mechanism by which to study the earldom's origins and the many northern conflicts of the Scottish kings pre-1293, as a peripheral earldom seen through the prism of royal activities and ambition, and as an extension of the MacDonald lordship of the Isles in the fifteenth century. While these studies have yielded remarkable value, they also leave a large gap in scholarly work regarding the earldom. Throughout the medieval period Ross features in a secondary role in a historiography more concerned with examining royal and MacDonald activities, and there has been little effort to study the post-1293 earldom from the perspectives of its rulers. Also, the leadership of the earldom has not sufficiently been examined in connection with the politics of the wider kingdom of Scotland. More importantly, there have been no attempts to view the earldom from a perspective of continuity. It went through several distinct changes in leadership, and these have usually been studied in isolation, with little discussion regarding potential connections between comital rulers. This thesis will seek to address this lack of engagement with an earldom that played a significant role in shaping the political narrative of medieval Scotland.

Thesis Question

This then is the central thesis question: how did the earldom of Ross evolve politically after the MacTaggart dynasty had been established, and what were the dominant external

and internal political relationships that shaped the development of the earldom's different dynasties? This thesis will examine the political development of the medieval earldom of Ross from the time of William II, earl of Ross, in 1293 at the beginning of the Scottish Wars of Independence to the rebellions of Donald of Lochalsh, arguably the final attempt to maintain MacDonald presence in Ross, in the 1510s. The thesis will seek to construct a coherent narrative of the earldom's history, define the relationships that the earldom had with the Scottish kings and the lordship of the Isles, and determine what forms of variation and continuity accompanied the various dynasties that ruled the earldom in terms of local administration, strategic objectives, and patronage.

Sources

Evidence regarding the medieval earldom of Ross can be divided by chronology, into two broad categories: medieval sources, and the clan or genealogical histories primarily written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Medieval

The medieval material applicable to studying the earldom of Ross is varied and several categories can be defined. The first is the pre-1296 sources. Within this category Scottish sources contain a very limited number of contemporary charters that usually deal with church lands and ecclesiastical disputes, and several brief mentions in Scottish chronicles. These are heavily supplemented by externally generated sources: the *Chronicle of Man*, Norse sagas, Irish annals and English chronicles. In the literary sources, Ross is treated peripherally. The limitations of the pre-1296 material restrict the study of the politics of Ross prior to the Scottish Wars of Independence, giving us few accounts of the early earls of the MacTaggart dynasty. Because of the dearth of contemporary sources regarding pre-1296 Ross, non-contemporary sources provide supplemental, if sometimes inaccurate, evidence. Later medieval historians like Walter Bower, John Mair, Hector Boece, and George Buchanan mention Ross within the wider context of their national narratives, and can, at the very least, give a late medieval perception of the earldom and its political dialogue with those who exercised power in the Scottish government, despite the inaccuracies and agendas inherent in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century perspectives these men were writing through.

Information regarding the earldom notably increases from the First Scottish War of Independence onwards as English sources, particularly correspondence, provide unique accounts about the earldom, the earl and countess, and activities in neighbouring regions that affected Ross. Therefore, the second category is the period 1296-1415. During this period the earls of Ross appear more frequently in the records of the parliament of Scotland; indeed, the first entry in Robert I's parliamentary records is an act of homage by William II, earl of Ross, to the king in 1308.¹ After 1296 a greater amount of charter evidence survives; this is crucial for developing a narrative for the earldom and subsequent analysis of the political dialogues, and is complemented by exchequer accounts and a greater quantity of papal letters and supplications. Chronicle evidence becomes more detailed, and sources like Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*² become vital. Post-1296 medieval evidence is enhanced by John Barbour's *The Bruce*,³ which provides detailed accounts of national events and near-contemporary perspectives.

A second discernable increase in evidence corresponds with the MacDonald period of influence and lordship in the earldom, 1415-1510s. This is perhaps unsurprising due to the later period, and because of surviving lordship of the Isles charters that have been gathered and edited in modern times. One significant change during the MacDonald era is that more charters regarding northern and western Ross are available, as charter evidence up until then is almost exclusive to Easter Ross. This relative wealth of information has its benefits, but the disproportionate amount of evidence coming from the MacDonald era renders it difficult to determine the landholding patterns and political currents during the previous centuries, when the earls of Ross were of the MacTaggart line. Papal evidence regarding the local clergy of Ross also dramatically increases, and allows a more in-depth analysis of the secular and religious authorities in the earldom. The evidence during this period is also accompanied by fuller accounts from the now-contemporary fifteenth-century chronicles. The addition of a new chronicle specific to the reign of James II, the *Auchinleck Chronicle*,⁴ augments the available information base.

¹ *RPS*, 1308/1. Date accessed: 14 November 2012.

² *Scotichronicon*.

³ John Barbour, *The Bruce*, ed. A.A.M. Duncan (Edinburgh, 1997).

⁴ *Auchinleck Chronicle*.

Clan and Genealogical Histories

The second broad category of evidence encompasses the clan and genealogical histories, composed largely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The prejudicial perceptions of these histories are obvious, and their inaccuracies dictate caution when studying them. Most are primarily indulgent in promoting their own clan's status, and the portrayals of clans usually lack a sense of connection with the national narrative. However, as shown by William Matheson in the 1960s, a critical analysis of these sources can be crucial in determining the political narrative of a western Scotland, which would otherwise be a historiographical abyss.⁵

The most important of these is Sir Robert Gordon's *Genealogical History*.⁶ Gordon's work coincided with his guardianship of his young nephew, the 13th earl of Sutherland, which it has been suggested provided the stimulus for him as he fought to secure both the legacy and the power of his family through educating his nephew in practical forms of political lordship.⁷ In this Gordon was aided by his love of the amoral, pragmatic virtues extolled by the Roman historian, Tacitus, combined with an adherence to the principles of Stoicism.⁸ Gordon is followed by several other sources. Notable among these are the MacDonald histories: the *Sleat History* and the *Book of ClanRanald*.⁹ Since the MacDonalds exercised lordship in Ross in the fifteenth century, these sources give interesting perspectives and may reflect elements of the medieval Ross/Hebrides relationship. One clan compilation that is of particular use in studying Ross is known as the *Munro Tree*, compiled in 1734.¹⁰ This source provides important information regarding Easter Ross. Another important source is James Fraser's *Wardlaw Manuscript*.¹¹ This account often addresses activities in Ross and gives a unique perspective from the neighbouring region to the east of Ross. William Fraser's publication of *The Earls of Cromartie* and John MacKenzie's

⁵ William Matheson, 'Traditions of the MacKenzies', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 39/40 (1963), 193-228; William Matheson, 'Traditions of the Mathesons', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 42 (1965), 153-181.

⁶ Gordon, *Sutherland*.

⁷ David Allan, 'Ane Ornament to Yow and Your Famelie': Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun and the "Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland", *Scottish Historical Review*, 80 (2001), 24-44, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-44.

⁹ *H.P.*, i, 5-72; *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 138-309.

¹⁰ *Munro Tree*.

¹¹ *Wardlaw*.

seventeenth-century *Applecross Manuscript*¹² - function in a similar way for Wester Ross. Yet, perhaps the most pertinent source in this category is *Ane Breve Cronicle of the Earlis of Ross*,¹³ a compilation of a 1615 manuscript supplemented by eighteenth-century copies, because it is focused directly on the earls of Ross and Clan Ross.

Modern Historiography

In the late nineteenth century research on Scottish clan culture gained in popularity. Prominent among those who studied the clan histories was Alexander MacKenzie, who wrote important books regarding clans important to Ross.¹⁴ In the same century Donald Gregory produced work that sought to introduce a general narrative of the Highlands, while books like *Origines Parochiales Scotiae* and *Invernessiana* sought to compile data regarding Ross and nearby regions.¹⁵ Early twentieth-century studies of clan Ross followed a similar path of research as the nineteenth-century publications, A.M. Ross's *History of the Clan Ross* being the most notable.¹⁶ Unfortunately, as seen by J.R. Ross's *The Great Clan Ross*,¹⁷ such studies can be partisan, lacking in critical analysis of research material, and content to repeat outdated positions with lack of modern citation methods. Such works seem to fulfil at most a basic historic function and rely heavily on the opinions and approval of clan members.

Many recent studies of medieval Scotland treat Ross as a peripheral subject, as scholars seek to develop discussion on the Scottish kings. Pre-1215 Ross has benefited greatly from recent scholarship focused on the mormaers of Moray and kings of Scots, as seen in the work of R. Andrew McDonald and Alisdair Ross,¹⁸ or as a province of interest to the earls

¹² Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 462-513; *H.P.*, ii, 5-68.

¹³ *Chron. Ross*.

¹⁴ Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Clan Mackenzie; with Genealogies of the Principal Families*, (Inverness, 1879); Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Munros of Fowlis: with Genealogies of the Principal Families of the name: to which are added those of Lexington and New England* (Inverness, 1898).

¹⁵ Gregory, *History*, O.P.S.; *Invernessiana*.

¹⁶ A.M. Ross, *History of the Clan Ross* (Dingwall, 1932).

¹⁷ John Robert Ross, *The Great Clan Ross* (Lindsay, 1972).

¹⁸ R. Andrew McDonald, *Outlaws of Medieval Scotland: Challenges to the Canmore Kings, 1058-1266* (East Linton, 2003); Alasdair Ross, *The Kings of Alba, c.1000-c.1130* (Edinburgh, 2011); Alasdair Ross, 'Moray, Ulster, and the MacWilliams', in *The World of the Galloglass*, ed. Sean Duffy (Dublin, 2007), 24-44.

of Orkney as seen by Barbara Crawford.¹⁹ Ross does receive more specific attention in articles written by Alexander Grant and R. Andrew McDonald devoted to defining early Ross, and exploring the importance of Farquhar MacTaggart and the subsequent early dynasty.²⁰ Yet the early history of the earldom is largely restricted to minor references; the emergence of Somerled and his progeny, and the power of Galloway gains the majority of attention, with Ross being examined as an outside factor affecting the west coast.²¹ The lack of scholarship regarding Ross is even more telling through the fourteenth century, which is content to address Ross only from the perspective of national events and royal bibliographies.²² Overlooking Ross continues in scholarship concerned with the fifteenth century. As suggested by Boardman, MacDonald possession of Ross has been treated as superficial, as many scholars focus on the characteristics of the cultural and political uniqueness of the Hebrides.²³

The fall of the MacTaggart dynasty in 1372 and the subsequent struggles to control the earldom resulting in MacDonald control of Ross in the fifteenth century offers two different ways of studying Ross. The first is through its relationship with the Scottish kings and royal governments. These studies are usually limited to discussing the earldom as an object of Bruce and Stewart ambition: Stephen Boardman's *Early Stewart Kings*, Karen Hunt's thesis on the Duke of Albany, Michael Brown's *James I*, Christine McGladdery's *James II*, Norman Macdougall's *James III* and *James IV*.²⁴ The second seems to approach

¹⁹ Barbara E. Crawford, 'The Making of a Frontier: The Firthlands from the Ninth to Twelfth Centuries', in, *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland*, ed. John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh, 1986), 33-46.

²⁰ Alexander Grant, 'The Province of Ross and the Kingdom of Alba', in *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era*, ed. E.J.Cowan and R. Andrew McDonald (East Linton, 2000), 88-126; R. Andrew McDonald, 'Old and new in the far North: Ferchar Maccintsacairt and the early earls of Ross, c. 1200-1274' in *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland, c. 1200-1500*, ed. Steve Boardman and Alasdair Ross (Dublin, 2003), 23-45.

²¹ R. Andrew McDonald, *The Kingdom of the Isles, c. 1100-c.1336* (East Linton, 1997); Richard Oram, *The Lordship of Galloway* (Edinburgh, 2000); Keith J. Stringer, 'Periphery and Core in Thirteenth -Century Scotland: Alan Son of Roland, Lord of Galloway and Constable of Scotland', in *Medieval Scotland: Crown, Lordship and Community*, ed. A. Grant and K.J. Stringer (Edinburgh, 1998), 82-113.

²² G.W.S. Barrow, *The Kingdom of the Scots* (London, 1973); G.W.S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005); Colm McNamee, *The Wars of the Bruces* (East Linton, 1997); Michael A. Penman, *David II* (East Linton, 2004); Michael Penman, *Robert the Bruce King of the Scots* (New Haven and London, 2014).

²³ Steve Boardman, 'The lost world: post-medieval accounts of the lordship of the Isles' in *The English Isles: Cultural transmission and political conflict in Britain and Ireland, 1100-1500*, ed. Seán Duffy and Susan Foran (Dublin, 2013), 151-174, 154-155.

²⁴ Stephen I. Boardman, *The Early Stewart Kings: Robert II and Robert III 1371-1406* (East Linton, 1996); Hunt, 'Albany'; Michael Brown, *James I*, Revised edition (East Linton, 2000); Christine McGladdery, *James II* (Edinburgh, 1990); Norman Macdougall, *James III* (Edinburgh, 2009); Norman Macdougall, *James IV* (East Linton, 1997).

Ross as an appendage of the MacDonald lordship of the Isles. Work has been done in this area by John Bannerman, Jean Munro and Norman Macdougall,²⁵ but perhaps the most noteworthy publication to advance the study of the earldom of Ross from this perspective is the work of Jean and R.W. Munro in compiling, and giving context to, the charters of the lordship of the Isles.²⁶ These methods of interpreting Ross yield remarkably valuable context and successfully link the earldom to the larger political community of Scotland. However, an alternative presents itself: to study the earldom of Ross from its own perspective; to consider the earldom first and construct a narrative of the earldom based on the evidence available, in order to better understand Ross's medieval story.

Perhaps the most pertinent studies that have inspired this thesis are Steve Boardman's study of the Campbells and Michael Brown's work on the Black Douglasses.²⁷ Both of these works successfully compose historical narratives around specific dynastic kindreds through charter and literary sources, and are able to evaluate how they established and maintained regional empires. These studies highlight the value that modern analysis regarding the development of regional dynasties can have for the historiography of medieval Scotland.

Methods

The primary mechanism through which the thesis question will be explored is by studying the activities of individuals. The earls of Ross and other local magnates will be examined through their appearances in contemporary historical record, and this will be compared with literary sources. Through these comparisons relationships and political agendas will be extrapolated. Particularly, patterns in witness list appearances will be used in hypothesising on possible allegiances, in a quasi-prosopographical approach, a method used extensively by Stephen Boardman, Michael Brown and Michael Penman. Therefore the structure of this thesis will be based around the individual comital rulers of Ross. Since the earldom will be studied primarily through the earls, the emphasis as to what constituted

²⁵ K.A. Steer and J.W.M. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, Appendix ii, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1977), 201-213; Jean Munro, 'The Lordship of the Isles' in *The Middle Ages in the Highlands*, ed. Loraine Maclean (Inverness, 1981), 23-37; Norman Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel? The Earldom of Ross, the Lordship of the Isles, and the Stewart Kings, 1449-1507' in *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era*, ed. Edward J. Cowan and R. Andrew McDonald (East Linton, 2000), 248-275.

²⁶ A.L.I.

²⁷ Stephen Boardman, *The Campbells: 1250-1513* (Edinburgh, 2006); Michael Brown, *The Black Douglasses* (East Linton, 1998).

the earldom will be viewed through the prism of how and where the earls were able to project their authority. This thesis will also analyse, and where possible integrate, local activities with the national politics of the kingdom. To evaluate aspects of continuity, the thesis will re-evaluate Ross's dialogue with the Hebrides through record and literary sources.

Identity and Perceptions

In order to understand the political development of Ross, the definition of what Ross was, and how it altered over time, should first be explored, bearing in mind the distinct differences between territorial and jurisdictional authority of the earls. Alexander Grant has convincingly argued that as an identifiable region, the thirteenth-century province of Ross probably extended from the Dornoch Firth west along the Oyckell River, south to the Beaully Firth and then southwest along the River Beaully. However, the pre-1293 earldom itself was limited to between the Dornoch and Cromarty Firths, its southern boundary stopping before the burgh of Dingwall, while its western extent is difficult to determine.²⁸ The land had a history of Norse presence, as seen through archaeological and place-name evidence.²⁹

Grant's definition is useful for studying Ross prior to 1293, but the earldom's physical boundaries continuously changed throughout the fourteenth century. More importantly, the earls of Ross were able to establish their influence in other areas beyond the earldom to such an extent that its patrimony extended across the whole of northern Scotland. This hegemony based on its sphere of influence signified the real importance of the earldom. In the fifteenth century, the MacDonalds assumed the comital title of Ross and the hegemony of Ross was incorporated into the equally large hegemony of the lordship of the Isles. Because of the ever-changing nature of the earldom's patrimony, the earls' jurisdictional authority, and areas that the earls held under their influence, this thesis will attempt to view the earldom as the centre of the larger hegemony of Ross. It is hoped that placing emphasis

²⁸ Grant, 'The Province of Ross', 88-126, 88-90; For a map of what the thirteenth-century earldom of Ross may have looked like see *ibid.*, 89. However, Watson did consider much of Wester Ross was attached to Farquhar's earldom, see, W.J. Watson, *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty* (Inverness, 1904), xxii.

²⁹ James Graham-Campbell and Colleen E. Batey, *Vikings in Scotland: an Archaeological Survey*, (Edinburgh, 1998), 68-70; Crawford, 'The Making of a Frontier', 42-44; Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987) 96; Watson, *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, xviii, xxv; Ian A. Fraser, 'Norse and Celtic Place-Names Around the Dornoch Firth', in *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland*, ed. John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh, 1986), 23-32.

on this wider hegemony, rather than the earldom in isolation, will be a more productive way of conducting research into how the earldom functioned politically within the kingdom of Scotland.

The fluid nature of the earldom's physical boundaries and the earl's sphere of influence necessitate other ways of identifying exactly what Ross was. One approach is to define Ross through the medium of perceptions. The Highland/Lowland division is a well-documented phenomenon in the historiography of Scotland, though the accuracy of the perceptions expressed by early authors is sometimes doubted by modern historians. This division between the Highlands and the rest of Scotland is a significant consideration in studying the earldom of Ross, since today the region is commonly determined to be part of that Highland area so remarked upon by medieval and subsequent commentators on Scottish history. It would be impossible to introduce either a narrative or analysis of this northern earldom without first evaluating how Ross is treated by sources.

Medieval Perceptions

Steve Boardman has shown that the anti-Gaelic disposition of medieval sources did not necessarily translate into the contemporary political context, especially on either side of 1400 when the early Stewart kings and the Albany Stewarts were trying to maintain and expand their own presence in Gaelic Scotland.³⁰ What of Ross? Perhaps the best place to start is with one of the earls. In 1304 William II, earl of Ross, wrote to Edward I and categorised the MacRuaris and their allies as men from the *foreyns Iles de Escoce* [foreign isles of Scotland].³¹ Clearly, this earl regarded the Hebrides and the MacRuari lordship of Garmoran as different from himself and his earldom, or at least wanted the English king to think that there was a difference. But perhaps the earl did not represent the earldom per se; in *The Bruce* John Barbour disassociated the earl from the local men of Ross in his account of the capturing of Bruce's family at Tain.³² William's fateful complicity with Edward I then changes to a relationship with Robert Bruce once Bruce becomes king. Indeed, there is a marked effort on the part of Barbour to tie the earls of Ross to the Bruces: Barbour features Walter, son of the earl of Ross, as a great companion of Edward Bruce, and

³⁰ Stephen Boardman, 'The Gaelic World and the Early Stewart Court', in *Mìorun Mòr nan Gall, 'The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander'? Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern*, ed. Dauvit Broun and Martin MacGregor (Glasgow, 2009), 83-109.

³¹ TNA SC 8/3/121; *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1631.

³² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 152-153.

Walter's death at Bannockburn is the subject of Edward's great lamentation.³³ This underlines the perception that the earl functioned within the sphere of mainstream Scottish politics. Dauvit Broun has noted that John Barbour was less likely than other commentators to comment on Gaelic Scotland being different from the rest of the kingdom,³⁴ and Boardman suggests Barbour was most likely using a wide range of Gaelic sources, gathered from members of court.³⁵ Therefore Barbour's description of the earl and his son may indicate the perceptions of Ross which were prevalent at the Scottish court in the 1370s.

By the fifteenth century Ross was changing fundamentally as the MacTaggart dynasty was a thing of the past and the MacDonalds took prominence. As a contemporary, Walter Bower is a useful individual to examine when exploring perceptions of Ross and the lordship of the Isles. Brown suggests that as an agent of the royal government of James I, Bower shared his king's contempt for the power of the nobility.³⁶ This threatened the status of the earldom which had for centuries functioned semi-autonomously. Bower's general support of James I translated into royal assignments of great magnitude. Brown suggests that James I's trust in Walter Bower as a royal agent was demonstrated when the abbot was made custodian of Alexander MacDonald's mother, despite the abbot's opposition towards royal taxes.³⁷ It has been pointed out that, although the royal records never recognised Mary Leslie as the countess of Ross, Bower accorded her the title *comitissa de Ross* in 1428-30 in his chronicle.³⁸ This might reflect the reality of the situation in Ross, or hint at the sympathies felt towards Mary and Alexander by the wider community. Recognition by the papacy and Walter Bower of Mary Leslie and her son highlight that the actions of James I were not accepted by all.

Despite Bower's recognition of Mary's legitimacy in Ross, he seems to have had a negative view of the earldom itself; possibly an extension of general hostility towards the autonomous nature of lordship in the Highlands and Hebrides Bower has a specific

³³ Ibid., 504-505.

³⁴ Dauvit Broun, 'Attitudes of Gall to Gaedhel in Scotland before John of Fordun', in *Mìorun Mòr nan Gall, 'The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander'? Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern*, ed. Dauvit Broun and Martin MacGregor (Glasgow, 2009), 49-82, 56-58.

³⁵ Boardman, 'The Gaelic World and the Early Stewart Court', 104-108.

³⁶ Michael Brown, 'Vile Times': Walter Bower's Last Book and the Minority of James II', *Scottish Historical Review*, 79 (Edinburgh, 2000), 165-188, 172.

³⁷ Brown, 'Vile Times', 170.

³⁸ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 149; *Scotichronicon*, viii, 258-259, 262-263, 276-277.

example of the king's justice in Ross concerning the king executing a bandit for nailing horseshoes to a woman's feet.³⁹ Brown noted the irony that this tale contrasted with the subsequent failure by Bower to convey that the king's authority was weakening in Ross due to the royal defeat at the battle of Inverlochy in 1431.⁴⁰ Of course Bower could have received additional information regarding the event, allowing him to identify Ross as the location of the crime. But could he have had a more politically motivated agenda? Michael Brown suggests that, since Bower was a member of Queen Joan and Bishop Kennedy's faction in the early 1440s via his patron, David Stewart of Rosyth, Bower was an enemy of the Black Douglasses, as William, eighth earl of Douglas, overthrew the government Bower was associated with and perhaps inflicted personal grief on Bower in the form of the 1445 'herschipe of Fife'.⁴¹

With Bower writing from a perspective of general anti-nobility, with both the Douglasses and MacDonalds as the primary antagonists, it remains to uncover the reasons for this connection with Ross. It would be convenient to link Bower's story about Ross to the abbot's distaste for the Douglasses, as the earl of Ross was cultivating friendships with the Douglasses in the mid-fifteenth century.⁴² If so, then Bower's portrayal of the iniquitous crime in Ross might be a direct attack on the relationship that the Douglasses had with Ross, and an expression of Bower's discontent with those who would challenge royal authority, and possibly linked to a more general hostility to the Highlands and Isles which functioned pre-dominately outside royal authority.

Sixteenth-century historians give interesting perspectives on Ross. These men were well acquainted with the history of the lordship of the Isles and Ross, and contributed to the idea of the Highland/Lowland divide in Scotland. According to John Mair, children of his own generation used Harlaw as a common theme for their imaginary battles while at play:

Hot and fierce was the fight; nor was a battle with a foreign foe, and with so large a force, ever waged that was more full of jeopardy than this; so that in our games,

³⁹ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 320-321.

⁴⁰ Brown, 'Vile Times', 173.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 175-182; *Auchinleck Chronicle*, f.111v, 162.

⁴² *A.L.I.*, no. 45.

when we were at the grammar school, we were wont to form ourselves into opposite sides, and say that we wanted to play at the battle of Harlaw.⁴³

Perceptions of Ross vary by author. When John Mair recounted James I's imprisonment of the Highland leadership he labelled these powerful men, who included both John Ross, lord of Balnagown and William Leslie, sheriff of Inverness, as 'Wild Scots'.⁴⁴ Clearly Mair perceived the nobles of the earldom of Ross as being a part of a wider Highland culture. But Martin MacGregor suggests that Mair's disposition towards the Highlands in general is far more neutral than Bower, based on Mair's positive descriptions of the 'Wild Scots' and his admittance of the pervasiveness of the Gaelic language.⁴⁵ George Buchanan gives more details regarding the people of Ross and the MacDonalds than Mair. In his description of the events that led to the battle of Harlaw he stated that Donald, lord of the Isles, was welcomed by the people of Ross because he was their rightful lord.⁴⁶ For Buchanan the loyalties of Ross were natural because in his eyes Donald was the legitimate heir.

However, it is Hector Boece who provides the most prolific commentary regarding Ross. His willingness to give accounts about the Highlands was the first real deviation from the vagueness exhibited by Fordun and Mair, making Boece a pivotal counterweight in the early historiographical developments of Scottish history. Crucial to this was Boece's depiction of both the Isles and Ross/Moray as centres of power, often linked together in alliances, which supported his efforts to display a strong cultural heritage of Northwest Scotland. Martin MacGregor suggests that the true legacy of Boece is ultimately less than positive towards the Gaels, because the end result is that they are pushed to the periphery of Scottish history.⁴⁷ Yet Boece's unintentional sidelining of the Gaels can be forgiven in the study of Ross, for Boece enjoyed using Ross as one of his primary examples of the Highlands. The historical reliability of Boece has been questioned,⁴⁸ though recent

⁴³ Major, *History*, 348.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁴⁵ Martin MacGregor, 'Gaelic Barbarity and Scottish Identity in the Later Middle Ages', in *Mìorun Mòr nan Gall, 'The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander'? Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern*, ed. Dauvit Broun and Martin MacGregor (Glasgow, 2009), 7-48, 30.

⁴⁶ Buchanan, *History*, ii, 78.

⁴⁷ MacGregor, 'Gaelic Barbarity', 45-47.

⁴⁸ A.A.M. Duncan, 'Hector Boece and the Medieval Tradition', in *Scots Antiquaries and Historians*, Abertay Historical Society, 16 (Dundee, 1972) 1-11; Jenny Wormald, *Court, Kirk and Community: Scotland 1470-1625* (Edinburgh, 1981), 66-67; Roger A. Mason, 'Kingship, Nobility and Anglo-Scottish Union: John Mair's History of Greater Britain (1521)', *Innes Review*, 41 (1990), 182-222.

scholarship has given him credit for being more accurate than previously believed.⁴⁹ Regardless, what is more important is that his accounts may have value for studying perceptions of Ross.

Boece tells the story of Evanus, captain of the Isles, who headquartered at Dunstaffnage and who seems to have made alliances with the men of Ross, Caithness, and Moray in opposition to Constantine II, son of Kenneth.⁵⁰ Boece's description of a hurriedly drawn up campaign on the part of Constantine to repress this Evanus demonstrates the very real danger posed by a Hebridean leader who could unite these regions centuries before similar occurrences were seen in the thirteenth century - when the MacWilliams allied with Harald, earl of Orkney, and MacHeths sought the aid of Somerled - and the MacDonald possession of both the earldom of Ross and the lordship of the Isles in the fifteenth century. In another passage Boece recounts a tale of the death of King Duffus [Dubh], who incurred the wrath of the Island Thanes and subsequently was murdered in Moray by Donald, the keeper of Castle Forres, while the king was finishing a campaign against rebels in Ross and Caithness. Some of the conspirators then fled to Orkney, according to Boece.⁵¹ Once again Boece connected the Isles with Ross, Caithness and Moray in this tale. Wrathful Isle chieftains, insurrectionist tendencies in Ross and Caithness and murderers in Moray all contribute to the downfall of this unlucky king of Scots, with Orkney as a desirable location of shelter for the king's enemies.

There were of course exceptions to Boece's illustrations of the relationship between Ross and the Hebrides, as seen in the mention of a Hebridean raid on Ross early in the reign of Kenneth III.⁵² Nevertheless, there seems to be a desire by Boece to demonstrate periodic unity in the Gàidhealtachd. Perhaps his most developed account in this vein has the men of Ross with their counterparts in the Hebrides, Galloway, Caithness, Orkney, and Moray set in common rebellion against King Malcolm.⁵³ Perhaps the most curious of Boece's accounts occurs far later in his narrative and far closer to his own time. When discussing the events surrounding James I's intervention in the north during the 1420s, Boece repeats Bower's story of the woman shod with horsehoes but also names the bandit as one

⁴⁹ Nicola Royan, 'Scotichronicon rewritten? Hector Boece's debt to Bower in the *Scottorum Historia*' in *Church, Chronicle and Learning in Medieval and Early Renaissance Scotland*, ed. Barbara E. Crawford (Edinburgh, 1999), 57-71.

⁵⁰ Bellenden, *Chronicles* (1821), ii, 173-175.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 205-209.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 282-285.

‘MacDonald Ross’.⁵⁴ This is a further indication of Boece’s perception of the intimate nature of the relationship that the population of Ross had with lordship of the Isles just prior to the MacDonalds gaining the comital title to Ross.

Clan History Perceptions

Clan histories can add another dimension to the MacDonald relationship with Ross, as they provide some of the more colourful illustrations of the spectrum of perspectives. The most extreme comments come from the *Wardlaw MS*, which describes the earls of Ross as wanting nothing to do with the people they ruled over. Regarding a feud between the Mackays and MacLeods, the manuscript states:

We have here a clear indication of the barbarity and inhumanity of our Highlanders, noted to be *duri, horridi, immanes, omnium denique pessimi*; rough, harsh, theevish, peevish people, and as bad as those that are worst, as if they were *sine rege sine lege*, without liege without law, which may be seen in their rude rapins and ravenous revenges, bloody, insatiable, and cruel, ane against another, whom neither King nor law, reason nor religion, could mannage or rule. The good Earles of Rosse are weary of their own situation near and among them, and the Lords of Lovat uneasie in such a bad neighbourhood...⁵⁵

This excerpt echoes the earlier works of Fordun, Bower and Mair. *Wardlaw*’s author, James Fraser, borrows the Highland/Lowland concept and applies it locally to accentuate the differences between the Fraser lords of Lovat and the neighbouring population of Ross. The depiction of weary earls of Ross sickened by their own subjects is a mechanism to enable Fraser to admit to the close ties that the Frasers historically had with the ruling kindred of Ross, while still being able to denigrate the local population. In doing this, *Wardlaw* unexpectedly repeats John Barbour’s own attempt at separating the earls of Ross from the people.

Despite the animosity demonstrated by the *Wardlaw MS* towards the population of the earldom, it stops short of renouncing Ross altogether. In fact, once the MacDonalds are rooted out of Ross the *Wardlaw MS* alters its tone dramatically, proudly citing specific examples of Fraser involvement and supremacy in the earldom and diocese. The chronicle

⁵⁴ Ibid., 501-502.

⁵⁵ *Wardlaw*, 88.

recites the qualities of John Fraser, who became bishop of Ross in 1486 and who invited his kinsmen the Frasers of Fruid to migrate to the north in 1492, and then dwells for several pages on how these Frasers integrated into the leading echelons of Ross, marrying into clans MacCulloch, Munro, Ross, Sinclair, Innes and Gordon to name a few.⁵⁶

The earl of Cromartie, intent on proving MacKenzie loyalty to the Scottish crown and his clan's legitimate claim to Kintail and Ross, decried the earl of Ross, the MacDonalds, and the MacRuaris for their opposition to Robert Bruce during the Wars of Independence. He related the depredations resulting from the friendship between Ross and the MacDonalds, which culminated in the earl of Ross and the lord of the Isles conjointly attacking and laying waste MacKenzie lands several times prior to Bannockburn (1314) and during David II's imprisonment (1346-1357). Cromartie then goes on to tell how the MacDonald ties to Ross continued when the earldom of Ross passed to the Leslie line, through which Ross was incorporated into the MacDonald hegemony.⁵⁷ Though Cromartie's depiction of an anti-Bruce MacDonald is fictitious - Angus Og MacDonald was a known ally of Bruce - by lumping Earl William and the lords of the Hebrides together as enemies of Bruce, Cromartie was echoing earlier historians like Boece in the belief that Ross and the Hebrides were often tied together. Cromartie's reasons for associating the MacDonalds and Ross were of course very different from those of Boece; he wanted to paint a picture of MacKenzie legitimacy at the expense of the others in his narrative, yet the tradition of linking the interests of the Hebrides with the earldom of Ross was being perpetuated.

Sources emanating from the clans of Easter Ross depict the earldom quite differently. In its first passage, *Ane Breve Cronicle of the Earlis of Ross* depicts Farquhar, the first of the MacTaggart earls, as being a part of the king's court, travelling with him to England to participate in a wrestling competition to defend the honour of the Scottish king against a French knight named 'Dougall Duncansone' employed by the English king.⁵⁸ The chronicle suggests that the MacTaggart dynasty was firmly placed as guardians of the Scottish kings and receivers of royal patronage. The curious name of the French opponent of Farquhar perhaps hints at MacTaggart animosity towards Hebridean lords who swore English allegiance.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 115-120.

⁵⁷ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 465-467.

⁵⁸ *Chron. Ross*, 1.

The Munro traditions found in the *Munro Tree* depict the clan in a balanced fashion, maintaining alliances with the kings of Scots and the lords of the Isles alike. Like so many clan genealogies, that of the Munros traces their roots from Ireland and associates their migration to Scotland as military aid for the king of Scots in 1025 in order to defend against Viking raids.⁵⁹ This continues to be seen in the fourth generation of Munros which follows:

Robert Munro of Fowlis assisted his Sovereign King Malcolm in his wars against his unnatural subjects he married and left a son Donald and a daughter Anna married to Angus McDonald of Yla and Dying A D 1164.⁶⁰

Here the *Munro Tree* combines loyal service to the king with strengthening ties to the fortunes of the ruling kindred of the Hebrides. Indeed, neither of these entries speaks of western ties without immediately citing service to the crown.

MacDonald sources agree with the idea of the Munros - as well as the Dingwalls and Roses - being closely tied to the Clan Donald sphere of influence through Angus Og MacDonald's marriage, as members of the bride's retinue.⁶¹ These traditions underline a very close working relationship between the MacDonald earls of Ross and Clan Munro during the fifteenth century.⁶²

Perhaps the most illuminating story exploring the settlement and politics of Clan Ross west of the earldom found in the *Sleat History*, is the account of Patrick the Red:

First, he [Alexander] took to him the concubine, daughter to Patrick Obeolan, surnamed the Red, who was a very beautiful woman. This surname Obeolan was the surnames of the Earls of Ross, till Farquar, born in Ross, was created earl by King Alexander, and so carried the name of Ross since, as best answering the English tongue. This Obeolan had its descent of the ancient tribe of the Manapii; of this tribe is also St. Rice or Rufus. Patrick was an abbot, and had Carlebay in the Lewis, and the church lands in that country, with 18 merks lands in Lochbroom. He had two sons and a daughter. The sons were called Normand and Austin More, so

⁵⁹ *Munro Tree*, 2, A.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, D.

⁶¹ *H.P.*, i, 20; *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 159.

⁶² See below, chapters 4 and 5.

called from his excessive strength and corpulency. This Normand had daughters that were great beauties, one of whom was married to Mackay of Strathnavern; one to Dugall MacRanald, Laird of Mudort; one to Macleod of Assint; one to MacDuffee; and another, the first, to MacLean of Bororay. Patrick's daughter bore a son to Alexander Lord of the Isles and Earl of Ross, who was called Austin, or as others say, Augustine.⁶³

Of course this tale is full of statements of unknown historical value and inaccuracies, but of equal importance to the historical facts concerning Alexander MacDonald's ties to Clan Ross are the perceptions that the MacDonalds held towards the kindred they superseded. The account of Patrick gives a unique MacDonald perspective on the Rosses, and their links to the MacDonalds. There was value in transmitting any tradition closely associating the MacDonalds with the old ruling family of the earldom; the MacDonald claim to Ross stemmed from a marriage with the Leslies, another kindred without a historical presence in the earldom prior to the 1370s, and which had gained the earldom by questionable means. The MacDonalds needed to connect themselves to the older lineage of the MacTaggart earls. The *Sleat History* states that Patrick was an abbot in Lewis; perhaps this was a mechanism to connect the MacDonalds to the religious origins of the MacTaggarts. Although the position of abbot does not have the same meaning as *mac an t-sagairt* ('son of the priest'), there is a certain consistency in portraying Patrick as a member of the clergy. Patrick's significance could also be attributed to political sensitivities; a clergyman of the Ross kindred holding extensive lands in Lewis was less threatening to Hebridean chiefs than a relative of the old earls in a secular position of power. The account of Alexander MacDonald's Ross concubine demonstrates ongoing intimacy between the kindreds of Ross and MacDonald, and advanced the case for MacDonald legitimacy in the earldom.

While the *Sleat History* generally identifies a strong relationship between the MacDonalds and the old ruling kindred in Ross, other sources are not as keen to extol the virtues of MacDonald rule in Ross. At first glance the *Wardlaw MS* seems to be highly anti-MacDonald in outlook. In commenting upon the battle of Harlaw it portrays a MacDonald pretender who inflicted great suffering.⁶⁴ Its perception of the Frasers' relationships with

⁶³ *H.P.*, i, 34-35.

⁶⁴ *Wardlaw*, 92.

their western neighbours is negative and clearly differentiates the Frasers of Lovat from their neighbours in Ross, who are described as unruly, immoral, and uncivilised.⁶⁵

Interestingly, the *Wardlaw MS* omits any reference to Alexander MacDonald's activities as earl of Ross. According to this source, the primary reason for James I's visit to Inverness was to quell the activities of Angus Dubh Mackay,⁶⁶ not the transgressions of the lord of the Isles. From the chronicle's account of Donald at Harlaw, the next reference to the MacDonalds is that concerning Alexander of Lochalsh in the 1450s.⁶⁷ This omission could stem from the contemporary demonstrations of fealty the lords of Lovat made to Earl Alexander MacDonald; apparently the Fraser chronicler was not prepared to accept this. Instead, the *Wardlaw MS* focuses most of its negativism between 1426 to 1450 on the Mackays of Strathnaver.

In contrast, *Ane Breve Cronicle of the Earlis of Ross* is more than willing to make positive statements regarding Earl Alexander MacDonald:

And thairefter Alexander Ila was erll of Ross and Justice for the north; he was valzeant in all his actes, and lovinglie governit the erldome in tranquilitie and peace, and deyit at Dingwall, and was buryit at the channerie of Ross, the aucht day of May, ane thousand four hundreth fourtie and nyne reiris.⁶⁸

Though the chronicle does mention the transgressions of Alexander, it is done with very little prejudice against Alexander himself and it even tries to shift culpability for his actions against the king on to Alexander's mother.⁶⁹ The Ross chronicle does not stop with the good qualities of Earl Alexander, but also makes the rather remarkable gesture of labelling his uncle, John Mor MacDonald, as a man greatly loved by his people.⁷⁰ This was the father of the Donald Balloch who defeated the king's forces at Inverlochy in 1431, in reaction to Alexander's imprisonment by the king.⁷¹ The Ross chronicle therefore seems to

⁶⁵ Ibid., 99-100.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁸ *Chron. Ross*, 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁷¹ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 265.

have been written as a pro-MacDonald account with much in common with the sentiments of the MacDonald sources.

The Ross chronicle inserts another MacDonald earl of Ross, named Donald, between Alexander and John. This Donald entered into the Ross/Douglas/Crawford bond of 1445-1452, invaded the isle of Arran and drove off the bishop of Lismore, saw his own wife desert him for reported cruelties he inflicted upon her, forcefully took Inverness castle and then was murdered there by his own harpist in 1461.⁷² Simon Kingston notes the appearance of the extra Donald in chronicles and suggests that the cousin of the lord of the Isles, Donald Balloch, could be the identity of this man; the confusion originates in the power of Donald Balloch, and the similarities of 'Islay' and 'Isles' in Gaelic. Kingston even puts forth the idea that perhaps this was not as confused as it might seem, and Donald Balloch was possibly the man who allied himself with the Douglasses in the mid-fifteenth century.⁷³ However, the Donald in the *Breve Cronicle* seems to be a conflation of several prominent Clan Donald men: Donald Balloch, Earl John and his son, Angus Og. This conflated character was a device used to shift any evils of Earl John's tenure as earl of Ross onto an artificial individual, as seen by the following:

In July, the fourt day, in the yeir of God 1476, ane Parliament wes haldin at Ed^r in the quhilk John, Lord of the Iyllis and erll of Ross, was attendid pairtly for his awin evill deids, but maist speciallie for the defaultis of his fater, Donald, Lord of the Iyllis.⁷⁴

Ane Breve Cronicle made a conscious decision to shift the more traitorous and heinous actions in the narrative of the MacDonald lordship in Ross onto others than John MacDonald, last earl of Ross.

Modern Perceptions

Lack of mention of Ross in the Irish annals and the seemingly lesser place Ross held compared to Moray has filtered through to influence modern views of Ross as a region never quite prominent enough, always overshadowed by neighbouring powers and not

⁷² *Chron. Ross*, 13-15.

⁷³ Simon Kingston, *Ulster and the Isles in the Fifteenth Century: The Lordship of the Clann Domhnaill of Antrim*, (Dublin, 2004), 79-81.

⁷⁴ *Chron. Ross*, 15.

quite suitable to be classified in the same manner as mainstream Scotland. Ian Mowat states, 'Easter Ross could be likened to a Scottish Lithuania, attached to a Poland composed of Moray and the eastern Black Isle.'⁷⁵ In many ways this portrayal of Ross is similar to that sometimes associated with the lordship of the Isles. The modern struggle to find a modern description of Ross in its medieval context is comparable to efforts to classify the Hebrides. One amusing, if questionable, statement which attempts to describe the situation in the Hebrides in the prelude to the events of 1266 is as follows: 'Thus, the Islands were fast becoming so many medieval Cubas, and like it, in the interests of humanity, calling for neighbourly interference.'⁷⁶ The implication is that the Hebrides were isolated from the political and cultural mainstream in Scotland. Both Ross and the Hebrides are classified as somehow different from, and lesser than, the rest of Scotland. Perhaps the almost imperceptible influences of medieval historians like Boece are exposed here. Boece, so eager to link the Hebrides and Ross together in their fortunes and to demonstrate the virtues of that other breed of Scots, was not so dissimilar in his writings from those who scratch their heads trying to find a way of identifying why in their views Ross and the Hebrides are fundamentally segregated from the rest of the kingdom.

Yet within the last few decades these views have given way to other trains of thought. Recent interpretations of Ross have leaned towards viewing the earldom as a border zone, which up until 1215 was a realm between the kingdoms of Scotland, the Norwegian earls of Orkney and the Hebrides.⁷⁷ On the face of it this template is understandable; it echoes the medieval descriptions of the earldom's fate as sometimes being attached to Moray while at other times being within Norse and Hebridean spheres of influence.

The early MacTaggart dynasty in particular is generally viewed as a protector of the Scottish kingdom from the threats stemming from the kingdom of Man and the earls of Orkney and Caithness. A.A.M. Duncan describes Farquhar, first MacTaggart earl of Ross, as a rarity, a 'native' lord loyal to the Scottish kings.⁷⁸ Alexander Grant defined a 'hybrid' form of nobility forming around the Scottish kings,⁷⁹ and R. Andrew McDonald has

⁷⁵ Ian R.M. Mowat, 'The Moray Firth Province: Trade and Family Links in the Eighteenth Century', in *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland*, ed. John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh, 1986), 69-87, 85.

⁷⁶ Robert Bain, *History of the Ancient Province of Ross* (Dingwall, 1899), 63.

⁷⁷ Crawford, 'The Making of a Frontier', 33-46.

⁷⁸ A.A.M. Duncan, *Scotland The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1975), 197.

⁷⁹ Alexander Grant, 'Scotland's "Celtic Fringe" in the Late Middle Ages: The MacDonald Lords of the Isles and the Kingdom of Scotland,' in *The British Isles, 1100-1500: comparisons, contrasts and connections*, ed. R..R. Davies (Edinburgh, 1988), 118-141.

classified the first two MacTaggart earls of Ross as fitting within this mould, made unique by their strong support for the royal governments, agreeing with Duncan's assessment.⁸⁰ Yet other historians sound a note of caution in simplifying the cultural divides in Scotland.⁸¹

Views of Ross during the MacDonald dynasty are dramatically different. The earldom became part of the larger MacDonald hegemony. This has kept most studies of the earldom limited to a subsidiary factor in analysing the lordship of the Isles.⁸² Norman Macdougall's 'Achilles Heel' theory denotes an inherently negative view of the relationship between the MacDonalds and Ross, concluding that the MacDonald hegemony was too large for the MacDonalds to manage while Ross was a prominent part of this problem.⁸³ Within this context, the earldom was no longer the bulwark in which the Scottish kings placed trust to control the north; instead, it was a source of royal fears.

Historiographical perceptions of Ross, medieval to modern, consistently tie Ross to the Hebrides. This consistency contrasts with the fluid nature of the earldom's physical definition. Also, medieval and clan histories view Ross as a source of violence and, at times, opposition to royal authority. Curiously, these accounts sometimes disassociate individual earls from those they ruled, or from certain unsavoury events. Possibly this is an indication that the earls was also seen at times as a positive authority in northern Scotland. Perhaps it is possible that the earldom can be better defined by these perceptions in conjunction with its physical attributes: Ross was a northern earldom situated strategically through which it could project its influence across the north and function as a conduit to the Hebrides.

⁸⁰ McDonald, 'Ferchar Maccintsacairt', 45.

⁸¹ Susan Reynolds, 'Fiefs and Vassals in Scotland: A View from Outside', *Scottish Historical Review*, 82 (Edinburgh, 2003), 176-193, 192; Matthew H. Hammond, 'Ethnicity and the Writing of Medieval Scottish History', *Scottish Historical Review*, 85 (2006), 1-27.

⁸² Munro, 'The Lordship of the Isles', 23-37; Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 148-150; *ibid.*, Appendix ii, 201-213; Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 248-275; *A.L.I.*

⁸³ Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 275.

Prologue: The Beginning of a Dynasty 1215-1274

Knowledge of pre-1293 Ross is sparse despite the attention it received from earls of Orkney and Scottish kings in military ventures. The tendency for Ross to be seen in military terms has led to it being perceived somewhat negatively by Scottish sources, as a hub of violence that threatened the stability of Scotland. Norse sources from the kingdom of Man and the earldom of Orkney also view Ross in a military context, especially once the early MacTaggart earls of Ross involved themselves in the political sphere of the Irish Sea. Finally, Irish sources seem only to report Ross in the context of rebellion against the Scottish crown. Because of the scant nature of accounts and the general focus on violence of those that do exist, it is difficult to construct a balanced representation of Ross and the beginnings of the MacTaggart dynasty. Nevertheless, it is important to place the earldom in context, in order to understand the later dominant position the earls of Ross held in the north and their connection to the Hebrides. Ironically, while the dearth of primary sources make it difficult to construct a narrative for twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ross, the first two MacTaggart earls, Farquhar and William I, have received more attention from modern scholarship than subsequent earls. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into the competing theories which try to explain the intricacies of the twelfth/thirteenth century struggles to control northern Scotland, but some exploration of the period is warranted to lay the foundation for understanding the subsequent development of Ross.

There is a divide in the geographical outlook found in the pre-1293 sources: the chronicles and sagas that reference Ross and its earls do so from a conspicuously western point of view, while the limited charter and papal evidence focuses on Easter Ross and its relationships with Moray or the Bisset barony of the Aird. Methodologically, this makes any study of thirteenth-century Ross difficult to evaluate equitably, as record sources are the primary mechanism for understanding the earls in their eastern politics and literary sources do the same for the west. Equally curious is Farquhar's relative prominence in literary sources compared to his son. Aside from William I's attack on Skye, all references to him come from charter evidence. This creates another methodological divide, as Farquhar is pre-dominantly seen in an Irish Sea context, while accounts of William I necessitate a preoccupation with the Aird and Moray.

Scholarship has defined the region that became the earldom of Ross in early medieval Scotland as a frontier zone, as Scottish kings fought various enemies to establish authority over northern Scotland: the MacWilliams – descendants of Duncan II – the MacHeths –

previous earls of Ross – and the earls of Orkney.¹ By the early thirteenth century a new source of power was emerging. It was the campaign of Donald Bàn MacWilliam which saw the introduction of the man who would begin a comital dynasty in Ross which would last until 1472. In 1215 Farquhar MacTaggart made his historical debut. *The Chronicle of Melrose* records how an untitled Farquhar utterly destroyed the military force of Donald Bàn, cut off the heads of the leaders and presented these gruesome trophies to the king, for which actions Farquhar was knighted.²

Following Farquhar's victorious entrance into the historical record, the man and Ross then disappeared from the records until 1221. It seems likely that Farquhar used this period of time to stabilize the province of Ross and to establish his own lordship over the region. Grant noted the lack of support that the MacWilliam cause received from Easter Ross after 1215,³ a testament to Farquhar's tenacity and ability to maintain control of a region that must still have been volatile. The historical rise of Farquhar to the position of earl has been obscured by the romantic tale found in *Ane Breve Cronicle*, in which Farquhar achieved his comital title by winning a wrestling competition.⁴ The length of time between the events of 1215 and Farquhar's formal accession as earl of Ross remains unclear, but Alexander Grant suggested that a likely date was in 1221 when Alexander II was in Inverness restructuring elements of his government.⁵ The chronicles are silent regarding Farquhar's previous activities, and his origins are a source of speculation by historians; theories have ranged from origins in Applecross in the west to Tain in the east.⁶ His origins may be an insoluble conundrum, but what is more concrete is that the first MacTaggart earl of Ross had strong ties to the kingdom of Man.

¹ Grant, 'The Province of Ross', 88-126; McDonald, 'Ferchar Maccintsacairt', 23-45; Barbara E. Crawford and Simon Taylor, 'The Southern Frontier of Norse Settlement in North Scotland Place-names and History', *Northern Scotland*, 23 (2003), 1-76, 1-12; Crawford, 'The Making of a Frontier', 33-46; McDonald, *Outlaws of Medieval Scotland*.

² *Chron. Melrose*, 59-60; English translation can be found in *E.S.*, ii, 403-404.

³ Grant, 'The Province of Ross', 122.

⁴ *Chron. Ross*, 1.

⁵ Grant, 'The Province of Ross', 122.

⁶ William F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland: A History of Ancient Alban*, i, 2nd edition (Edinburgh, 1886), 483-484; Grant, 'The Province of Ross', 88-126, 117-121; *Historic Tain, Archaeology and Development*, ed. R.D. Oram, P.F. Martin, C.A. McKean, T. Neighbour and A. Cathcart, Historic Scotland (Oxford, 2009), 20.

The Earl of Ross and the Kingdom of Man

The association between the earls of Ross and powerful magnates in the Hebrides was rooted in the events of the early thirteenth century. One of the more tantalizing elements of the life of Earl Farquhar was his ties to Olaf, half-brother to Ranald, king of Man. Olaf had a history of strife with his half-brother. According to the Manx chronicle, Ranald captured Olaf after a quarrel, and sent him to William, king of Scotland. Upon William's death Olaf was released and after a religious pilgrimage returned to his brother's kingdom, whereupon Olaf took as wife Lauon, the sister of his brother's wife, at the behest of King Ranald. However, this marriage was found to be untenable when Ranald, bishop of the Isles, called the union invalid since Olaf was also involved with Lauon's first cousin. Olaf repudiated Lauon and took instead Christina, the daughter of Earl Farquhar, as his wife. This provoked an immediate response from the kin of Lauon, and Godred, son of King Ranald, attacked Olaf in Lewis which saw Olaf forced to flee for his life.⁷ Since Lauon was designated by the chronicle as daughter of a lord of Kintyre, historians have identified her as the daughter or sister of Ruari, lord of Garmoran.⁸ Casting her away not only created a rift between Olaf and his half-brother, Ranald, king of Man, but also earned the enmity of the powerful lord of Garmoran and Kintyre. It is fairly certain that Olaf's reason for changing wives was not solely based on the bishop's remonstrations. It is left to examine the political implications and determine why Olaf and Farquhar formed an alliance.

When Olaf fled he went to Ross where he sought the protection of Earl Farquhar. He was joined by the sheriff of Skye, Paul, son of 'Boke'. Together they formed an alliance, gathered a force sufficient to conquer Skye, and captured Godred Ranaldson on Iona.⁹ The record is vague on Earl Farquhar's role in subsequent events leading to the eventual success of Olaf in his war with his half-brother, but R. Andrew McDonald's interpretation of Olaf's campaign includes the physical presence of Earl Farquhar in Olaf's return to Skye.¹⁰ The Manx chronicle certainly suggests Olaf and Paul recruited their army while they were in the earldom of Ross. If so, Earl Farquhar probably played a large part in this. A tripartite alliance seems to have formed with Earl Farquhar supplying the bulk of Olaf's initial military force.

⁷ *Chron. Man*, f.41.v-f.42.v.

⁸ Alex Woolf, 'A Dead Man at Ballyshannon', in *The World of the Galloglass*, ed. Sean Duffy (Dublin, 2007), 77-85, 81; Richard Oram, *The Lordship of Galloway* (Edinburgh, 2000), 125.

⁹ *Chron. Man*, f.42v.-f.43r.

¹⁰ McDonald, *Kingdom of the Isles*, 85.

Farquhar's association with Olaf has been interpreted as an extension of King Alexander II's will.¹¹ However, for Earl Farquhar this was an opportunity to advance his own interests in the west. If Farquhar did receive his title of earl of Ross in the year 1221 then his comital status was new in 1223, and he probably was keen to establish himself with the ruling dynasties. Allying himself to a Manx contender elevated Farquhar to the highest levels of political status, not to mention intrigue, and declared the earl's ability to engage with powers other than the king of Scots. Effectively, negotiation with Manx lords was a statement that Farquhar was not completely reliant on the Scottish Crown for his future position. Farquhar's actions in marrying off his daughter, Christina, to Olaf had a marked similarity to the earlier marriage of Malcolm MacHeth's daughter to Harald, earl of Orkney. The MacHeth marital alliance with Orkney was used to provide leverage against the Scottish Crown. Farquhar would have been thoroughly aware of the benefits of this past arrangement and, although he never followed in his predecessor's footsteps of being openly opposed to Alexander II, Farquhar was attuned to the other potential rewards of an alliance with a Norse magnate.

Throughout this whole drama the Isle of Skye was the central location of events. Skye seems to have been the initial goal of Olaf's campaign. Earl Farquhar may have been promised a portion of the island or its revenue in exchange for his support. He may also have been interested in the northern parts of the lordship of Garmoran or the Isle of Lewis. With King Alexander II's dissatisfaction with Ruari, lord of Garmoran and the king's attack on Kintyre a year earlier, the earl of Ross may have thought to expand his own holdings at the expense of this particular noble while the atmosphere was favourable. These lands held importance to later earls of Ross: Farquhar's son led his own campaign on Skye in 1262; Farquhar's grandson, William II, had jurisdictional powers in Skye, Lewis, and the majority of the lordship of Garmoran as the sheriff of Skye in 1293; and in the fourteenth century earls of Ross exercised lordship in Skye and northern Argyll.¹² Accordingly, Earl Farquhar's alliance with Olaf and Paul, sheriff of Skye, should probably be understood as an arrangement through which Farquhar was able to extend his influence into the Irish Sea world.

The Manx civil war continued intermittently for five more years, with Ranald's ally, Alan of Galloway, prolonging the conflict, but by 1228 Ranald was killed, leaving Olaf and his

¹¹ McDonald, 'Ferchar Maccintsacairt', 39-40.

¹² See below, 46-47, 49-50, 82.

allies, Earl Farquhar and Paul son of 'Boke', as victors. However, this victory was threatened when the king of Norway sent his own candidates, Uspak Ogmondsson and Godred Dond, to rule the kingdom of Man in 1229 at the expense of Olaf. Only after both of these men were killed did Olaf finally reign undisputed as king in 1230.¹³

It is unclear how the intrusion of Uspak affected the alliance between the earl of Ross and King Olaf. Perhaps it was the chance Olaf needed to renege on any promises that he may have made to Farquhar in exchange for his support. Certainly the earl of Ross does not seem to have invested heavily in Olaf's kingship after 1223. There are no further records in the chronicles of any military aid sent to Olaf by Farquhar, nor is there any mention of Farquhar's reaction to the introduction of Uspak and Godred Dond into the political equation. Even Olaf's initial campaign in 1223 began with only one vessel, hardly a substantial force, which presumably was financed by Earl Farquhar. The solitary appearance of Farquhar as Olaf's ally is contrasted by Alan of Galloway's presence on the opposing side of the war. According to the Manx Chronicle, Alan personally led large expeditions against Olaf in 1224 and 1228 and probably supplied the five ships of Ranald's fateful 1228 winter raid.¹⁴ Farquhar's lack of support for Olaf might have been a result of his preoccupation with the MacWilliam rebellions recorded throughout the 1220s and 1230, but if there was a relationship between the MacWilliams and the lord of Garmoran then Olaf's war for control of the kingdom of Man was directly linked with Farquhar and Alexander II's war with the MacWilliams.

The Manx civil war demonstrated an interesting polarity. Olaf found refuge and aid with his father-in-law, the earl of Ross, while Ranald enlisted the support of Alan of Galloway. It has been maintained that Alexander II supported Ranald via Alan of Galloway.¹⁵ Keith Stringer suggested that Alexander II used Alan's connection with Ranald, king of Man, in particular the marriage arrangements to marry off Alan's bastard son Thomas to the daughter of King Ranald, to further his own agenda of realizing a kingdom of Man which owed its fealty to the king of Scotland.¹⁶ McDonald suggests that just as Alexander was

¹³ *Chron. Man*, f.43r.-f.44v.

¹⁴ *Chron. Man*, f.43v.-f.44r.

¹⁵ Oram, *Domination and Lordship*, 189-190.

¹⁶ Stringer, "Periphery and Core in Thirteenth -Century Scotland", 96.

behind the actions of Alan of Galloway, the Scottish king was similarly using Farquhar, elevating Farquhar's regional power whilst increasing the crown's authority in the west.¹⁷

The motives assigned to the Scottish king have created a picture that Alexander II implemented a divide and conquer strategy by encouraging Alan of Galloway to support Ranald and Farquhar to back Olaf, thereby increasing Alexander's ability to impose his will in Argyll and the Isles.¹⁸ This theory presupposes that Alexander II had a fair grasp of how to manipulate two of his most influential noblemen on the edges of his kingdom who were known rivals. However, Richard Oram has noted that the rise of Farquhar to the position of earl of Ross signalled the reduction of Alan of Galloway's influence as the king's primary lieutenant for matters involving the Hebrides.¹⁹ Another possibility is that if King Alexander supported Alan of Galloway's alliance with Ranald, king of Man, then Earl Farquhar's alliance with Olaf was rather self-serving, and places doubt on Farquhar's image as an unwavering supporter of Alexander II.

In 1234 Alan of Galloway died, and soon after the Gallovidians rebelled against King Alexander.²⁰ In response Alexander II gathered an army and invaded Galloway the following year. This campaign saw Earl Farquhar join the king's standard but the earl's own army was detached from the king's main force, lagging behind. This separation proved fortunate for the royal army since the decisive moment of the ensuing battle was attributed to the troops under Farquhar. Upon his arrival on the battlefield the earl of Ross attacked the rear of the Gallovidian army. Earl Farquhar crushed the Gallovidian forces; the rear assault routed the Gallovidian army and Farquhar pressed home his advantage by pursuing the enemy throughout the remaining hours of daylight.²¹

Richard Oram suggests that Thomas of Galloway received the bulk of his military strength from the Irish kindred of *Ua Domhnaill* and Ruari, lord of Garmoran.²² If so, Farquhar had another incentive for supporting the king's forces in Galloway as it provided a means of crushing his own regional rival in the west, Ruari of Garmoran. The chronicle hints that

¹⁷ McDonald, 'Ferchar Maccintsacairt', 40.

¹⁸ Noel Murray, 'Swerving From the Path of Justice: Alexander II's Relations with Argyll and the Western Isles, 1214-1249', in *The Reign of Alexander II, 1214-49*, ed. Richard Oram (Leiden & Boston, 2005), 285-305, 290.

¹⁹ Oram, *Domination and Lordship*, 191.

²⁰ *Chron. Melrose*, 83; English translation can be found in *E.S.*, ii, 494.

²¹ *Chron. Melrose*, 84; English translation can be found in *E.S.*, ii, 496.

²² Oram, *Lordship of Galloway*, 144.

Earl Farquhar's own force was lagging behind the royal army. The reason for this detachment of the earl's troops might be explained simply if the king was unwilling to wait for Farquhar to arrive or, more intriguingly, Farquhar's army may have been behind the king's army because it had been engaged in other activities. Farquhar could have been delayed from meeting the king because he was conducting preliminary manoeuvres against Ruari of Garmoran, neutralizing any threat to the king's army from the north and preventing further aid reaching Thomas of Galloway.

Earl Farquhar's involvement in the royal suppression of the Gallovidians underlined the dynastic politics of the kingdom of Man in which he was deeply involved. Indeed, it is possible that Farquhar's military appearance in 1235 should be taken as proof that he was still very much engaged in Manx affairs. Alan of Galloway had secured the marriage between his bastard son, Thomas, and the daughter of Ranald, king of Man; Thomas of Galloway was a claimant to the Manx throne and a challenge to the progeny of Olaf the Black who were Farquhar's nephews. The rebellion in Galloway gave Earl Farquhar the means to enact the final blow against those who opposed his son-in-law.

The identity of the mother of Olaf's son and heir Harald remains an important unknown. Alex Woolf noted the significance of the mother's background in determining what lay behind the events of the western seaboard, but came to the conclusion that Lauon or Christina both had an equal probability of being the mother of Harald since the birth of Harald occurred in the period when Olaf replaced Lauon with Christina as his wife between the years 1222-1223.²³ It is worth postulating that Christina, daughter of Earl Farquhar, was the mother of Harald because this offers one possible explanation why subsequent earls of Ross sought to increase their connection in the west into the Hebrides and more specifically the Isle of Skye. After all, if Lauon had been the mother of Harald it seems unlikely that Olaf would have been keen to set her aside if she had so recently successfully given birth to his heir. It is safe to assume that Harald's brothers, Ranald and Magnus, were Christina's sons. Both of them became kings of Man after Harald's death in 1248; Ranald only reigned as king for 27 days, but Magnus was king for over a decade from 1254 to 1265.²⁴ This means that Earl Farquhar and Farquhar's son, Earl William I, were grandfather and uncle to the last three kings of Man. This would have tied the politics of the earldom of Ross firmly to the kingdom of Man.

²³ Woolf, 'A Dead Man at Ballyshannon', 82.

²⁴ *Chron. Man*, f.47r., f.49v.

After his appearance in 1235 saving the royal army, Farquhar disappears from medieval chronicles. However, he may have played a role in the downfall of the Bissets in the 1240s. Chronicle accounts attribute the fall from grace of both John Bisset and his uncle, Walter Bisset, lord of Aboyne, to their involvement in the murder of Patrick, earl of Atholl, the son of Thomas of Galloway, in 1242.²⁵ A.A.M. Duncan suggests that the murder of Patrick of Atholl was caused by the issue of who would inherit Thomas of Galloway's lands.²⁶ Despite its questionable reliability due to being a late clan history, it is worth noting that according to the *Wardlaw MS*, the earl of Ross was commissioned by Alexander II to apprehend John Bisset after the Bissets had forged an alliance with Donald, Somerled's grandson and progenitor of the MacDonalds.²⁷ It was possible that Donald's influence reached the Aird; another tradition holds that Donald sent the progenitors of the Roses of Kilravock to settle there.²⁸ This tradition is also suspect, as with so many later genealogical traditions; there are no other ways to substantiate the claim that Donald was planting adherents so far east. Nevertheless, the Fraser's *Wardlaw MS* and the Rose family traditions both claim that Donald was active in the Aird: he introduced the Roses into the Aird, and found common ground with John Bisset.²⁹ If there were connections between the Aird and Donald, then these could have been perceived as a threat to the earl of Ross; the royal commission to capture Bisset was an indication of his interests in these events. Farquhar's previous interaction and possible connections to Galloway may also hint at the truth of his role in the Bisset exile. However, there is no reference to the earl of Ross having partaken in subsequent actions against Bisset.

William I

Ane Breve Cronicle states that Farquhar's death occurred in 1251.³⁰ As noted by R. Andrew McDonald, the date does tend to agree with all other information known concerning Farquhar's chronology, and is consistent with the period when his son, William, appears to bear the title; even if 1251 was not the precise year, Farquhar's death can confidently be placed in the 1250s.³¹ The first reference to William as earl is dated

²⁵ *Chron. Melrose*, 90; *English translation in E.S.*, ii, 530, 533-534; *Scotichronicon*, v, 178-185.

²⁶ Duncan, *Scotland*, 544-545.

²⁷ *Wardlaw*, 55.

²⁸ *Family of Rose*, 26.

²⁹ There were no mentions of Donald's brother, Ruari mac Ranald. This seems odd as Ruari's lands were in a much closer proximity to Ross and the Aird than Donald's own holdings.

³⁰ *Chron. Ross*, 4.

³¹ McDonald, 'Ferchar Maccintsacairt', 42.

1258, although perhaps he was made earl earlier if his father had died closer to 1251. At the time of his installation, William was presumably already a competent adult. He had been active in the regional affairs of Moray, focused around ownership of Duffus, in 1232, when he was a witness to an arrangement between Gilbert, the son of the deceased earl of Strathearn and Andrew, bishop of Moray.³² Earl William's involvement with the Freskins of Sutherland and Duffus can be traced from this document, and these relations were to be tested later when William was embroiled in disputes with the bishop of Moray.

William's assumption of his father's earldom signalled a shift in the political relationship between Ross and Moray. During Farquhar's time the bishops of Ross and Moray had been engaged in extensive disputes and compromises over ecclesiastical boundaries.³³ By the mid-thirteenth century these issues were causing problems for the earl of Ross, with relations between Earl William and the bishop of Moray becoming increasingly antagonistic. Their differences culminated in violence when Earl William damaged the churches of Petty and Brackley within the diocese of Moray. In consequence, the earl was forced to pay restitution to Bishop Archibald by giving Elgin Cathedral two davochs of Cadboll in Fearn parish and a portion of the land called 'Petkenny'.³⁴ The witness list of this reconciliation testifies to the prominent role that the clergy of Ross played in bringing about compromise between the earl and the bishop of Moray. It consisted of Colin, abbot of Fearn, Adam, precentor of Ross, Mathew, bishop of Ross, and Robert, the archdeacon of Ross. In comparison, it seems that only one witness from Moray was present.³⁵ While it was certainly normal that ecclesiastical leaders from Ross should witness such a document, perhaps the composition of the witness list hints at something more, representing a continuity of the conflict between the dioceses which had passed to Earl William.

Why would Earl William oppose the bishop of Moray with such violence? A scenario can be constructed from the surviving charter evidence. What exists of thirteenth-century records regarding Ross are a concentrated group of charters which deal with land transactions between powerful men in Ross, Moray and Sutherland, in which the newly

³² *Moray Reg.*, no. 80; Cynthia Neville, *The Earls of Strathearn: From the Twelfth to the Mid-Fourteenth Century, with an Edition of Their Written Acts*, ii (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1983), Appendix B, no. 13.

³³ See below, 46, 69-70.

³⁴ *Moray Reg.*, no. 220; Watson states that 'Petkenny' is an unknown place not to be confused with Balconie, see Watson, *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, 87. According to POMS the Pitkenny may be Pitcalnie, see, PoMS, Document 3/20/3, <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/source/3265/>; accessed 04 November 2013.

³⁵ *Moray Reg.*, no. 220.

created earls of Sutherland and lords of Duffus, both of the same Murray family, played prominent roles. Records show that Hugh Freskin, lord of Sutherland, had ownership of Ferincoskry in the early thirteenth century; near death he granted Ferincoskry to the archdeaconry of Moray, at the time held by Archdeacon Gilbert, along with the lands of Skelbo and *Innerchen* within Sutherland in 1203x1214.³⁶ W.J. Watson notes that Ferincoskry derives from the Gaelic *Fearann Coscraigh*, meaning ‘Coscrach’s land’, the boundaries of which approximately followed the parish of Creich on the northern side of the Dornoch Firth, then westward along the Kyle of Sutherland.³⁷

Hugh Freskin’s grant was confirmed by his son William, the future first earl of Sutherland,³⁸ followed by royal confirmation in 1212x1214.³⁹ Gilbert maintained possession of these lands when he was promoted to the bishopric of Caithness in the 1220s. In the winter of 1235 Alexander II verified Gilbert’s rights to these lands and acknowledged that they were to be held by Gilbert’s brother, Richard.⁴⁰ Gilbert continued to be closely tied to Moray throughout his life, and was one of the primary people responsible involved in the relocation of the ecclesiastical seat of Moray to Elgin in 1224.⁴¹ The bishop of Caithness also participated in the proceedings to elect William, chancellor of Moray, as bishop of Argyll in 1239.⁴² Finally, Bishop Gilbert was in charge of confirming a new dean of Moray in 1244.⁴³ This bishop of Caithness began a feud with the earl of Sutherland over the Skibo Castle and other lands which included the fishing rights to Bonar, within Ferincoskry. This feud was sustained by three successive bishops of Caithness until Bishop Archibald - yet another prelate with Moray ties who had previously been the chancellor and archdeacon of Moray - reached an agreement with the earl of Sutherland in 1275.⁴⁴

Similar events took place in Ross. Sometime before 1242 Earl Farquhar granted to Sir Walter Murray, son of Hugh Murray, lord of Duffus, the two davochs of land within Ross

³⁶ Ibid., appendix to preface, no. 1.

³⁷ W.J. Watson, *The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2004), 117.

³⁸ *Moray Reg.*, appendix to preface, no. 3.

³⁹ *R.R.S.*, ii, no. 520.

⁴⁰ PoMS, Document 1/7/238, <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/source/3265/>; accessed 05 September 2015.

⁴¹ *Moray Reg.*, nos. 57-58.

⁴² *C.P.L.*, i, 178.

⁴³ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁴ *Bannatyne Misc.*, iii, 21-24.

called Clon.⁴⁵ W.J. Watson associated this Clon or Clonys with the later Clyne, which is now called Mountgerald.⁴⁶ This grant therefore gave Sir Walter a foothold on the north bank of the Cromarty Firth less than two miles northeast of Dingwall. This grant was to have far reaching consequences for Earl William and the bishops of Moray. Just before Walter's son – Freskin, lord of Duffus and nephew of the earl of Sutherland – died he gifted his two davochs of Clon to the cathedral church of Elgin. This was an act which began a long string of subsequent confirmations indicating the importance of this donation, while also highlighting the high level of tension that the transfer of land in Ross to the see of Moray caused. Freskin's vassal, Fergus of Ardrossan, who seems to have been directly responsible for Freskin's lands in Clon, respected his deceased lord's wishes and granted the two davochs of Clon to Elgin Cathedral in 1263, with the exception of the interests of Lady Euphemia, Freskin's mother and the sister of Earl William of Ross, and the forinsec service owed to the king.⁴⁷ In February 1264 Euphemia quitclaimed to Bishop Archibald all her possessions in Ross, - amounting to a third of the land of Clon - to sustain two chaplains at Elgin cathedral.⁴⁸

However, despite these grants the issue of Clon was still unsettled, because the earl of Ross remained obstinately opposed to the wishes of his deceased nephew. From the date of his sister's grant, the earl of Ross refused to acknowledge the grants for five years. However, in the winter of 1269 Earl William finally granted confirmation of Freskin of Moray's gift of Clon to Archibald, bishop of Moray, and added for himself and future earls of Ross the giving of a pound of pepper to the bishopric of Moray, acknowledging the future immunity of Clon while still producing the services the king expected from the given land.⁴⁹ For the earl of Ross only to acknowledge Freskin's earlier donation after a period of at least seven years from the original grant suggests that Earl William was reluctant to see davochs in the central part of his earldom pass to the bishops of Moray, and pointed to a continued strain in relations between William and Archibald. Initially, the earl of Ross may have had the upper hand in his refusal to allow these lands to change hands. The various charters which reaffirmed the dying wishes of Freskin spoke of a need by Bishop Archibald to prove the legitimacy of the diocese of Moray's claim in the region.

⁴⁵ *Moray Reg.*, no. 259.

⁴⁶ Watson, *Place-Names of Ross And Cromarty*, 91.

⁴⁷ *Moray Reg.*, no. 215.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 216.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 217.

Very likely the Scots king was hesitant to press the issue of Earl William's feud with Bishop Archibald further, so long as the earl had important links to the kingdom of Man. The transfer of territory and the end of Norse rule which resulted from 1266 meant that Earl William could not hold out for much longer in his feud with the bishop of Moray. The absorption of the kingdom of Man into the Scottish kingdom also signalled an end to any level of autonomy from the Scottish kingdom that the earl of Ross enjoyed through being linked to the Manx royal family. By 1269 whatever leverage he may have had previously to keep Clon had evaporated. Once Earl William's position had diminished it was possible that the situation escalated to the point that the Crown felt a need to intervene. Between 1264 and 1266 the bishop of Ross was fined by the king's exchequer, as were the men of Caithness and earl of Sutherland.⁵⁰ Additionally, the earl of Ross was fined, although by 1266 his fine had been remitted.⁵¹ Barbara Crawford notes that these fines could have been related in some way to the national events of 1202 and 1222 when the earls of Orkney were subjected to punitive measures, but suggests that they were more likely related to the events of 1263-5 with Norway.⁵² However, it is worth suggesting that the reason for the fines against both the bishop and earl of Ross were extensions of Earl William's feud with the bishop of Moray.

In his study of Moray boundaries, Alasdair Ross noted the unusual status of the boundary with Ross. In particular he observed that the davoch of Erchless and the davoch of Crochail did not follow the pattern of the boundary of the Ross/Moray dioceses along the Beaully River.⁵³ In 1258, this was placed to the fore of regional politics when John Bisset, lord of the Aird, and Archibald, bishop of Moray, reached a settlement over the davoch of Erchless and another davoch on the church land of Covinth which previously the bishop had claimed belonged to Moray, demanding their restoration. Once again, the arbitrators presiding over this dispute are worth noting: Robert, the bishop of Ross, and the dean of Ross. This was a repetitive scenario of a secular lord of the Aird quarrelling with the bishop of Moray, overseen by a heavy contingent of Ross clergy. If Alasdair Ross is correct, then the bishop of Ross had a vested interest in Erchless. It was hardly a surprise then that the bishop of Moray was forced to give up his claim to Erchless and Covinth, with the cain associated with these lands, and renounce his litigation against Bisset.

⁵⁰ *E.R.*, i, 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵² Barbara Elizabeth Crawford, 'The Earls of Orkney-Caithness and Their Relations with Norway and Scotland: 1158-1470' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1971), 102, 107.

⁵³ Ross, *Kings of Alba*, 67-69.

Instead, Bishop Archibald received 60s from the land of Moniack within the Aird.⁵⁴ The results of this episode were clearly in favour of John Bisset. Indeed, since the earl of Ross had his own grievances against Bishop Archibald it is likely that John Bisset found a willing ally in the earl of Ross in refuting Moray's advances into the Aird. With both the earl of Ross and the lord of the Aird being opponents of the bishop of Moray, and with the bishoprics' long-standing disagreements over land, it would be surprising if Bishop Robert of Ross was not predisposed to rule against Moray interests. The bishop of Moray was therefore placed in the unenviable position of being faced by an array of political opponents; the lord of the Aird, the bishop of Ross and the earl of Ross stood determined to deny Moray further encroachment.

Alasdair Ross further suggests that the parish of Ardersier was also an earlier possession of the diocese of Moray, based on the assumption that its inclusion in the 1312 grant of Moray to Thomas Randolph was a reflection of an earlier 1130 perambulation.⁵⁵ This can be further explained by virtue of the agreement between Robert, bishop of Ross and Andrew, bishop of Moray in February 1227. In this document the bishop of Moray was to receive the church of Kiltarlity in exchange for renouncing all claims to Ardersier in perpetuity. At first this agreement seems to affirm the theory put forth by Alasdair Ross. However, the document gives the clear impression that Ardersier had been a part of the diocese of Ross over the lifetimes of multiple bishops.⁵⁶

Together these grants, donations and disputes of land involving the bishopric of Moray must have placed pressure on the earls of Ross, who saw the integrity of their earldom threatened by the growing influence of the Moray prelates. This may have also challenged Earl William's authority on the Black Isle where he seems to have been involved.⁵⁷

In 1262 Earl William made his only appearance in the chronicles when he attacked the island of Skye in a particularly vicious campaign with his ally, 'Kiarnak, son of Makamal', in which children were impaled on spears.⁵⁸ The violent treatment of the islanders by the victorious Earl William has been noted as having been ironic in its portent due to the Norse

⁵⁴ *Moray Reg.*, no. 122.

⁵⁵ Ross, *Kings of Alba*, 80.

⁵⁶ *Moray Reg.*, no. 75.

⁵⁷ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 445-446.

⁵⁸ *Codex Frisianus: En Samling Af Norske Kongesagaer*, ed. C.R. Unger (Christiania, 1871), 569; the English translation is in *E.S.*, ii, 605.

origins of the form of execution met out to the children of Skye.⁵⁹ It is possible the earl's behaviour reveals a strong cultural integration of Norse military practices in Ross. The established explanation of Earl William's brutal assault on Skye has been that it was a precursor to the tensions between Norway and Scotland that culminated in 1266,⁶⁰ but it is possible that Earl William's actions stem from an agreement reached by his father and King Olaf. Since Skye was part of the kingdom of Man, this meant the earl was attacking his probable nephew, Magnus Olafsson, with a possible link to his father's previous involvement with Skye. If Farquhar had been promised control over Skye or Lewis in return for his support of Olaf, then William might have been trying to enforce an unfulfilled agreement.

William's activities after 1262 are obscured by lack of evidence, but it is probable that the attack on Skye was part of a larger string of activities aiming to extend the earldom's influence in the west. A MacKenzie source written by the earl of Cromartie does mention that the 'Obeoland' family held parts of Kintail along with the Mathesons prior to 1266, but that Farquhar was essentially bribed by the king to resign his rights to Kintail in order to be made earl of Ross.⁶¹ Obviously Cromartie gives an inaccurate timeline; William I was earl of Ross in 1266, but the presence of 'Kiarnak, son of Makamal' in Earl William's army on Skye supports the idea that the earl of Ross did have substantial influence in Kintail.⁶²

Earl William died in 1274, according the *Calendar of Fearn*.⁶³ By this time he had demonstrated an ability to capitalise on the successes of his father, and had ruled with some semblance of continuity; an aggressive approach to extending Ross influence into the Hebrides and Wester Ross seems to have been a prominent focus. What perhaps had changed was the increase in tension with powers in Moray. Maybe the biggest development under Earl William was his attack on the bishop of Moray; an earl of Ross willing to take aggressive actions east of the Beaully River had not been seen since the activities of his father in the early thirteenth century.

⁵⁹ McDonald, *Kingdom of the Isles*, 106.

⁶⁰ McDonald, 'Ferchar Maccintsacairt', 43-44.

⁶¹ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 462-464.

⁶² William's grandsons seem to have controlled Kintail a century later; see below, 92-94.

⁶³ *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 22.

Conclusion

The lordship exercised by Farquhar and William I has traditionally been linked to the assertion of the authority of the Scottish kings in the regions north of the Moray Firth. These men have been labelled as native guardians of the province of Ross, loyal lieutenants to the Scottish kings and enforcers of the policies of their liege lords. These perceptions may not be incorrect, but neither are they comprehensive. By 1215 when Farquhar appeared in the historical record, the population of Ross had been involved in repeated military actions against the Scottish Crown, and while Farquhar was noted as the military leader who crushed the enemies of Alexander II, it does not mean that Farquhar was not affected by the political development of Ross. Farquhar's lordship clearly demonstrated a centre of gravity that leaned towards the Irish Sea world. The activities of Farquhar recorded in the chronicles correspond with actions that could just as easily have promoted his influence over the Manx royal family as much as demonstrating loyalty to the Scottish king.

William's time as earl seems to have been dedicated to the consolidation and expansion his authority in the west; this was demonstrated by his military actions in Skye. Yet, perhaps the obstacles he faced in Moray were more cause for concern during this period. There is no evidence that Farquhar himself had any quarrel with Moray; it was probably a relief to him that his northern flank was protected by the installation of William Freskin as earl of Sutherland, but the ecclesiastical leaders of Ross during Farquhar's rule had cause to worry that the bishops of Moray could undermine Ross's diocesan boundaries. During William's tenure this transformed into a secular worry as the expansionist tendencies of leading men of Moray were seen as threats to the integrity of the earldom that his father had established. These threats highlight the territorial vulnerability of the earldom during this period.

Despite the methodological difficulties and lack of evidence for Ross in the thirteenth century, it seems that both Farquhar and William I set the political agenda by which the earldom would progress: a highly engaged, if sometimes violent, relationship with the Hebrides, volatile political relationships with neighbouring eastern powers tempered by periodic interventions of royal authority, and a desire to confirm and expand existing territorial boundaries.

Chapter I: Ross, England, and the Bruce Dynasty: 1293-1372

This chapter is concerned with the earldom of Ross during the Scottish Wars of Independence and the kingships of the Bruce dynasty. The object of the chapter is to explore how the earls of the MacTaggart dynasty were able to propel themselves to the position of being the most important magnates in northern Scotland in spite of being on the wrong side of a national war, and to explain how they were later removed from prominence after years of friendship with the Scottish kings. The Scottish Wars of Independence and the reigns of Robert I and David II provide far greater amounts of information regarding Ross than any prior period of time. This is partially explained by the importance of William II, earl of Ross, to both Edward I of England and Robert Bruce, particularly during Bruce's campaign to control the north of Scotland. This was enhanced by the subsequent friendship cultivated between William II's son and heir, Hugh, and Robert Bruce. Royal charter evidence concerning the possessions of the earls of Ross increases dramatically in this period, and is accompanied by more generous mentions of the earldom by chronicles.

This chapter is structured chronologically. The first section considers the years 1293 to 1303 by constructing a narrative from a Ross perspective which examines how the earldom of Ross was affected by the activities of those who sought to destabilise the region during the absence of William II, earl of Ross. The second section covers the years 1304-1333. These years were defined by the establishment of Robert Bruce as king and the section focuses on how the earldom fared under Robert Bruce as he established himself as king by focusing on how William II and his son, Hugh, interacted with their new monarch. The third section is concerned with the years 1333-1346, which seeks to extend the narrative by studying the lordship exercised by William III during a period which roughly corresponds with the first half of the reign of Robert Bruce's son, David II. The final section examines the years 1346-1371, the final years of the MacTaggart dynasty and the return of David II from his English captivity, effectively his second reign. This section pays particular attention to the souring of relations between the earl of Ross and David II.

1293-1303

During the parliament of 9 February 1293, John Balliol created three new sheriffdoms: Skye, Lorn, and Kintyre. These sheriffdoms were assigned to William II, earl of Ross,

Alexander of Argyll and James the Steward respectively.¹ As sheriff of Skye, Earl William had risen to a position of authority unmatched north of the Moray Firth: a tangible reward for the earl's ties to the Comyns.² This sheriffdom comprised the king's land of Skye and Lewis, the lands of the earldom of Ross in north Argyll, the land of *Glenc'*, Uist, Rum, Eigg, and Barra with the small isles.³ Whilst the parliament record is unclear as to what constituted the portion of north Argyll the earl of Ross was to oversee, the sheriffdom of Lorne presents a rough calculation of the limit with regards to the jurisdiction Earl William held. The sheriffdom of Lorne consisted of the following: the holdings of the MacDonalds, Malcolm MacIvor, Colin Campbell, John of Glenorchy, Dougal of Craignish, John MacGilchrist, Alexander of Argyll, Gileskel MacLachlan, the lands of Morvern, Ardnamurchan, and Locheil.⁴ Therefore it seems likely that the earl of Ross's 'North Argyll' encompassed Kintail and Moidart. With the specific islands listed in the sheriffdom of Skye this gave the earl of Ross jurisdictional authority over the entire MacRuari lordship of Garmoran.⁵

The expansion of Ross's jurisdictional authority was not well-received by a significant portion of Hebridean lords. As Amanda Beam has noted, the creation of the sheriffdom of Skye perpetrated conflict and rivalries on the western seaboard.⁶ Earl William himself described an undated conflict with the MacRuaris during John Balliol's reign in a petition written in 1304 to Edward I; William recounted how the accumulated resentment found expression in a rising by the leaders of the *foreyns Iles de Escoce* against the policies of John Balliol and the authority of the earl of Ross, spearheaded by Alan MacRuari's son, Lachlan, half-brother to Christina of Garmoran. In response, Earl William mustered an army and successfully subdued Lachlan MacRuari and the other leaders. With the revolt crushed, Earl William was able to begin to assert practical control over his new sheriffdom and received ample reward from John Balliol, who, according to the earl's petition, granted

¹ *RPS*, 1293/2/16-19. Date accessed: 28 January 2013.

² William's mother was Jean Comyn, daughter of William Comyn, earl of Buchan, see *S.P.*, vii, 233.

³ *RPS*, 1293/2/16. Date accessed: 28 January 2013. *Glenc'* may be identified with Glenelg, but this is uncertain.

⁴ *RPS*, 1293/2/17. Date accessed: 28 January 2013.

⁵ The MacRuari kindred and their lordship of Garmoran consisted of the islands of Eigg, Rum Uist and Barra. Their mainland holdings centred on Moidart and the caisteal Tioram; see *A.L.I.*, xxviii-xxix.

⁶ Amanda Beam, *The Balliol Dynasty, 1210-1364* (Edinburgh, 2008), 124.

the earl control of Dingwall and Ferincoskry.⁷ Although the date of this conflict is unknown, it was probably the result of the earl of Ross being given authority over the lordship of Garmoran through the creation of the sheriffdom of Skye, a statement of refusal by the MacRuairis of being placed under the jurisdiction of the earl. Therefore, this conflict should probably be dated sometime soon after February 1293. It may well have been that Earl William was cultivating relationships with magnates in the Isles, most notably the leaders of the MacNicol kindred centred in Trotternish in Skye, and in Lewis at the expense of MacRuairi power.⁸

Leaderless 1296-1303

After the downfall of John Balliol, William II, earl of Ross, was in English custody in May 1296. Other prisoners who were connected to Ross were Sir William de la Haye, Sir Walter Barclay, Alexander Sinclair, Sir William Sinclair, Sir Andrew Murray, Sir David Graham, son of Patrick, and Sir Nicholas Randolph, son of Sir Thomas Randolph.⁹ Together, these men constituted the elite ruling group in Ross, Moray and the Aird. The imprisonment of these men left a power vacuum in northern Scotland which, far from aiding Edward I's need for consolidation, facilitated a period of unrest, rebellion and struggle for dominance. The most prominent of these was the military campaign instigated by Andrew Murray.

The advent of Andrew Murray's rising created a conundrum for Earl William's wife, Euphemia. Keen to see her husband returned to her, this lady was forced to tread a political tightrope. The countess of Ross maintained an active pro-English policy in Ross in the period of her husband's imprisonment. On 24 July 1297, at Inverness, Bishop Henry of Aberdeen, John Comyn, earl of Buchan, and Gartnait, son of the earl of Mar, wrote to Edward I of their quelling of rebellion in Moray and cited the assistance of the countess of Ross.¹⁰ However, doubts over the countess's loyalties plagued her efforts to placate Edward I's more ardent followers to obtain the release of her husband. A letter from an unnamed constable of Urquhart Castle written to Edward I the next day provides more detail: Alexander Pilche and Andrew Murray had raised an army at Avoch Castle in Ross;

⁷ TNA SC 8/3/121; *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1631. The petition makes reference to the fact that the earl had to pay the same feu ferme for Dingwall and Ferincoskry that had existed at an earlier time. This may suggest that the earls of Ross had held these lands in earlier times.

⁸ See below, 72-73.

⁹ *C.D.S.*, iv, no. 1768; *Ibid.*, ii, no. 742.

¹⁰ Stevenson, *Documents*, ii, no. 456; *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 920.

this force then ambushed a party of men on the king's business, on their way back to Urquhart Castle after meeting with Reginald Cheyne, and captured several notables. Murray's forces then besieged Urquhart Castle. These actions caused Countess Euphemia to respond. Curiously, her first action was an explicit declaration that she was not responsible for the militant attacks, that she would aid Urquhart Castle, but counselled mediation and surrender. This counsel went unheeded since the constable sensed that he could not trust her and that her advice would only increase the danger of his situation. The countess then sent her son (presumably Hugh) with her army to relieve the garrison of Urquhart. This was successfully done, but again, the constable was wary of the intentions of the countess and her son, still believing that trusting them would bring great calamity upon him and Urquhart. However, the constable's reservations proved groundless when the countess of Ross and her son demonstrated further signs of fidelity: the army of the countess of Ross managed to supply victuals to the castle which in turn led to a successful night attack by the garrison and the countess's forces. Andrew Murray was forced to withdraw to Avoch and Balconie, but not before the constable's son, Richard, and two other men of note were killed.¹¹ With her husband in the hands of the English, the countess could ill-afford such suspicions, but despite her best efforts her good faith was questioned. Nevertheless, the conduct of the countess and her son, Hugh, at Urquhart sufficiently quelled the misgivings of those who had the ear of Edward I and as a token of thanks Hugh Ross was able to obtain safe passage to visit his father in the Tower of London a month later in August 1297.¹²

Andrew Murray placed Countess Euphemia in an embarrassing, and potentially precarious situation. The location of the castles that Murray used as his headquarters indicate one reason why the countess may have wished to explicitly declare her loyalties: Avoch was an important barony on the southwest portion of the Black Isle overlooking the Moray Firth, a short distance from Inverness, while Balconie lay within the Ross heartland on the north side of the Cromarty Firth just north of Foulis, between Dingwall and Aness. To maintain communication between these two castles Murray would have had to control most of Cromarty, and the Cromarty Firth. If Murray chose to retreat to these areas upon the failure of his siege of Urquhart Castle, it would suggest that there was significant sympathy in Ross and the Black Isle for Murray's cause.

¹¹ C.D.S., ii, no. 922; William Mackay, *Urquhart and Glenmoriston: Olden Times in a Highland Parish*, 2nd Edition (Inverness, 1914), 20-21. The unnamed constable of Urquhart would be replaced by Sir Alexander Comyn, younger brother of the earl of Buchan, by 1304; see below, 62-63.

¹² C.D.S., ii, no. 961.

The countess's position was further compromised by her own status as a Comyn. Regional magnates who had local feuds with the Comyns would have been reluctant to comply with the countess's agenda. The Munros of Foulis in particular might have had grievances; a Munro genealogy compiled in 1734 states that Robert Munro had suffered at the hands of the Comyns.¹³ Clearly the author of this text wanted to associate the Munro family with the Bruce cause, this association being a general phenomenon of most Highland kindred genealogies and histories. But there were remarkable similarities between the Munro lands and Andrew Murray's regional strength. According to Munro tradition the land of Findon which lay within the barony of Avoch was Munro territory as early as 1126.¹⁴ Also, Foulis is close to Balconie and, as noted by R.W. Munro, the Munro holding of Foulis seems to have been co-extensive with Balconie.¹⁵

However, it is not known whether the Munros held Foulis or other lands in the barony of Avoch during this period. Findon does not seem to have been granted to the Munros until sometime between 1323 and 1333, when it was given to the grandson of the Robert who had allegedly suffered at the hands of the Comyns.¹⁶ It was not until 1350-1371 that Robert Munro, the earlier Robert's great-grandson, gained the lands of Easter Foulis.¹⁷ Finally, Wester Foulis was not granted to the Munros until 1394, when Euphemia, countess of Ross granted these lands to Hugh Munro, who according to existing evidence was perhaps the first to be styled as the lord of Foulis.¹⁸ Still, it is surely more than a coincidence that the lands from which Andrew Murray staged his revolt in 1297 would correspond so neatly with later confirmed Munro lands, and that a Munro genealogy should record the sufferings inflicted upon the kindred by the Comyns. With the earl of Ross in captivity and local nobles disinclined to align themselves with their own countess, Andrew Murray was able to benefit from an established base within Ross, probably counting on either the neutrality or active support of the nearby populace.

The population of the Aird was also wavering in its loyalties. The constable of Urquhart Castle wrote another letter to Edward I - undated but written around the same time as his correspondence regarding the countess of Ross (25 July) - asking the king to release

¹³ *The Munro Tree*, 2-3, H.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, C.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, iii.

¹⁶ *Munro Writs*, 1-2, no. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3, no. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5, no. 15.

Christian, son of John of the Aird, who had recently defended the safety of the constable and his children, because Christian was loved by the people of the region and such an action would do much to bring people to the side of the king.¹⁹ The implication was that many in the Aird sympathized with Andrew Murray and were dangerously close to joining the rebellion without the return of their local lords. Pro-Murray sentiment in the Aird could bring further discomfort to the countess of Ross who was rapidly being encompassed by those whose allegiances were not necessarily aligned with her own.

But while the capability of the countess to hold the loyalties of the people within her own earldom was in doubt, the ruling family of Ross was not completely bereft of allies. Most notably, certain nobles in the Aird remained steadfast. The aforementioned John and his son, Christian, of the Aird were both reliable supporters of Earl William and by extension of the countess. Christian of the Aird was a squire of the earl of Ross at the Battle of Dunbar and, like his liege lord, was taken to England as a prisoner.²⁰ Christian was then separated from the earl and sent to spend his time in captivity at Corfe Castle under the care of the sheriff of Somerset and Dorset.²¹ Funds for his maintenance there were recorded in March 1297.²² In the aftermath of Andrew Murray's failed assault on Urquhart, the two letters written by the constable of Urquhart requested both the release of Earl William and Christian of the Aird.²³ But the English rejected the petition to release Christian. In both 1299 and 1302 there are records of maintaining Christian in Corfe Castle.²⁴ This corresponded with the English retention of Earl William, who would also remain in English captivity until he was finally released in 1303.²⁵ The petitions for the release of these two men underlined the strong connection Christian of the Aird had with William, earl of Ross. The denial of these petitions, and the continued imprisonment of these men, also demonstrated the perceived strength of that connection. These ties to the earls of Ross would continue after the men's release, and Christian of the Aird faithfully served the earls of Ross, first Earl William and later Earl Hugh.²⁶

¹⁹ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 923.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ii, no. 742.

²¹ Stevenson, *Documents*, ii, no. 370.

²² *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 877.

²³ *Ibid.*, ii, nos. 922, 923.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, ii, nos. 1085, 1283.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ii, nos. 1399c, 1401.

²⁶ See below, 72, 81.

While the uprising of Murray and Pilche threatened to play havoc with loyalties within Ross, another menace to the stability of Ross came from the west. The absence of the earl was the perfect opportunity for kindreds who had been contained by the earls of Ross in North Argyll and the Isles to reassert themselves territorially, and reverse the gains of the earls which had spanned three generations, most recently highlighted by the 1293 creation of the sheriffdom of Skye. The primary source of this aggravation to Ross was the MacRuairis, led by the sons of Alan MacRuairi, Lachlan and Ruari.

G.W.S. Barrow suggests these men were mere lawless brigands.²⁷ Indeed, the first mention of Lachlan in contemporary sources was in July 1292 when Alexander MacDougall of Argyll, in his statement regarding his coming to terms with his rival, Alexander MacDonald of the Isles, made it known that he would have no dealings with Roland [Lachlan], son of Alan, and Duncan MacDougall, son of Alexander of Argyll, neither receiving nor giving them sustenance because of their transgressions and unwillingness to submit themselves to King Edward.²⁸ This statement is revealing, as it demonstrates Lachlan's early alliance with the MacDougalls in disputes with the MacDonalds. But the perception that these men's careers encapsulated a lifestyle of simple banditry and raiding is a simplification of the objectives behind the MacRuairi brothers' activities.

It was during the reign of John Balliol that Lachlan MacRuairi was first mentioned as having significant power in the isles, enough to challenge the earl of Ross as sheriff of Skye.²⁹ On 28 August 1296 Lachlan features in the Ragman Roll as 'Rouland fiz Aleyn MacRotherik, del counte de Innernys'.³⁰ It is unclear what, if any, association Lachlan actually had with Inverness. His earlier unsuccessful rebellion saw him subdued by the earl of Ross, and perhaps a period ensued in which he was held by the earl as security for good behaviour which could account for his association with Inverness.³¹ It seems plausible then that Lachlan spent a significant portion of time from 1293 to 1296 in an environment dictated by the earl of Ross, allowing Lachlan to educate himself on the nature of his rival, and have a valuable opportunity to develop contacts in the Inverness area that would have beneficial uses for the future. If Lachlan's title in the Ragman Roll is accurate then

²⁷ Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, 377-378.

²⁸ *Foedera*, i, II, 761a.

²⁹ See above, 50-51.

³⁰ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 823 (p. 209-210).

³¹ Lachlan's link with the region around Inverness may have been indicative of unknown MacRuairi interests in the area. However, the scribe could have simply made a mistake.

Lachlan's physical presence in the Inverness region could have allowed him to cultivate relationships with Alexander Pilche and even Andrew Murray.

In June 1297 Alexander MacDonald of the Isles wrote to Edward I twice. Both communiqués dealt with reporting the activities of Alexander MacDougall of Argyll and the MacRuari brothers, Lachlan and Ruari. The first letter recounted how Alexander of Argyll had attacked MacDonald lands. Following this, Alexander pursued and successfully defeated Ruari in battle. This brought Ruari to heel briefly, and he gave his fealty to the English monarch in the form of letters which were sent to Edward I. However, this proved to be a stalling measure as Ruari's brother, Lachlan, conducted a successful counter-assault against Alexander, and the pair of them then attacked Skye and Lewis. No-one was spared according to the report: men killed, women 'oppressed', and those within the immunities of the church burnt. The king's lands were ravaged so completely that it was feared the king's ferme would be worthless. In response, Alexander MacDonald was leading a force capable of retaliation, and requested that the king order the nobles of Argyll and Ross to support him in this endeavour if their assistance was required.³²

The second letter provides additional information concerning the 1297 movements of Lachlan and Ruari. After his submission to Edward I, Lachlan returned to the islands and laid waste the king's demesne lands. Messengers from the islands were sent requesting aid from Alexander MacDonald who fought Lachlan and Ruari – who seem to have had their own separate armies – multiple times, before capturing Lachlan. Curiously the letter mentions that the MacDonalds were hesitant to meet Lachlan in the lands of Alexander of Argyll and John Comyn of Lochaber because the men of those regions were sworn to Lachlan and Duncan, son of Alexander of Argyll, to oppose the authority of Edward I. Additionally, there was an unwillingness to meet Lachlan in the lands of these men due to Alexander of Argyll's daughter, but here the text is illegible and the exact connection of this lady to events is unclear. Lachlan eventually escaped and fled to Lochaber where the men of the region had sworn allegiance to him and his ally Duncan MacDougall. Then John Comyn, lord of Lochaber, challenged MacDonald naval supremacy by building two great galleys at his castle [Inverlochy]. Upon hearing of this, Alexander MacDonald made for the castle and destroyed the ships.³³

³² Stevenson, *Documents*, ii, no. 444.

³³ *Ibid.*, 445.

These two communiqués illustrate the constant state of conflict in which the MacRuaris were embroiled in 1297, and highlight the broader dynamics in which this kindred were involved. Significantly, the MacRuaris focused their attacks on Skye and Lewis, both part of the earl of Ross's sherifffdom of Skye. The first letter identifies the islands; the second omits their names but when considered next to the first letter, the conclusion must be that they were Skye and Lewis. The second letter also gives notice that these two islands were attacked twice. This subsequent assault was again described as an assault primarily occupied with looting, but the second attack within a month's time would have precluded any considerable accumulation of wealth on those islands since the previous spoilage, suggesting other ambitions for these isles. Instead, the MacRuari objective seems to have been the incorporation of Skye and Lewis into their own territorial holdings; the intervention of Alexander of the Isles could also have been a MacDonald effort to acquire these islands. Indeed, the conflict between the MacRuaris and the MacDonalds in 1297 could be interpreted as a regional power struggle to fill the void of the imprisoned earl of Ross in that portion of the Hebrides over which he had held authority. If the earl of Ross had not been imprisoned in England during this period, it is more than plausible that the messengers from the islands would never have gone to Alexander of the Isles at all, but instead would have presented their pleas for aid to William, earl of Ross. Therefore, the MacRuaris' 1297 campaign was most likely an extension of the conflict Lachlan had with the earl of Ross during John Balliol's reign, probably in association with the 1293 creation of the sherifffdom of Skye.

One curiosity within both letters is that Lachlan and Ruari rarely fought against the MacDonalds together. It is possible this was due to Lachlan's activities either within Ross, or with his allies in Argyll and Lochaber. Certainly, Alexander of the Isles was worried about a Ross/North Argyll component to the strategy of the MacRuaris when he requested that the English king order the nobles of both Argyll and Ross to stand ready to aid the MacDonald efforts.³⁴ This could indicate that the activities of the MacRuaris on Skye and Lewis was only a part of a larger strategy to enlarge the kindred's possessions and influence in lands associated with the earl of Ross's sherifffdom of Skye. The pattern continued and in the events recounted in the second correspondence Alexander of the Isles never seemed to confront both Lachlan and Ruari together. Furthermore, the chronological order of events becomes difficult to interpret, as seen when Lachlan offered up his son and castle as hostage presumably at the same time as Ruari conducted one of his raids on

³⁴ Stevenson, *Documents*, ii, 444.

MacDonald forces. These contemporary documents demonstrate that there was a pattern of Lachlan and Ruari splitting their military forces, acting quasi-independently. Commitments to multiple fronts meant the MacRuairis offered weak resistance to the MacDonald army, but allowed a certain amount of flexibility which was reflected in the inability of Alexander of the Isles to bring the MacRuairi brothers to terms at the same time; as one brother was contained, the other was marshalling for a counter-assault.

Communication by nobles to Edward I regarding Andrew Murray's rebellion in 1297 were dated in July, whereas Alexander of the Isles's memorandum concerning the attacks of Lachlan and Ruari was dated in June of the same year; there was only a month between the communication of the constable of Urquhart and the later letters of Alexander of the Isles. It is striking that the MacRuairi campaign on Skye and Lewis coincided so neatly with the rising of Andrew Murray. Murray's bases in Avoch and Balconie indicate that the earldom of Ross was in disarray. The disunity and strife in the earldom, and absent earl, provided the MacRuairis with the opportunity to destroy the administrative links between Ross and the isles that the sheriffdom of Skye may have produced. Lachlan and Ruari might have known of the Murray/Pilche activities in the east and the weakened authority of the countess of Ross. Certainly all of these conflicts occurring so closely together is curious, and could suggest that they had based their opportunistic advancement on comprehension of current events in the east. Although it is speculative, it is not inconceivable that the MacRuairi brothers could have been in communication with Murray directly, or via their ally Alexander of Argyll, and had made an agreement or loose alliance. After all, the MacDougalls had strong connections with a leading magnate in the barony of the Aird: in 1308 Lachlan's brother-in-law, John of Argyll, petitioned the English Crown that his son-in-law be released; this son-in-law was Patrick Graham, a prominent landowner in the Aird.³⁵

Lachlan's activities after his flight to Lochaber are obscure, but it appears that he continued his aggressions. In 1299 Lachlan was again reported as attacking the north of Scotland with his ally Sir Alexander Comyn, an attack so severe that it broke up a meeting of the guardians of Scotland at Peebles.³⁶ This Alexander Comyn seems to have been the

³⁵ C.D.S., iii, no. 65.

³⁶ TNA C 47/22/8/3; For English translation of the document see Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, 140-141; Barrow, *Kingdom of the Scots*, 381-382.

brother of the earl of Buchan,³⁷ and demonstrates Lachlan's ability to gain further Comyn allies despite his previous setbacks. However, by June 1301, Lachlan and his MacDougall allies sought an end to hostilities, and a commission was given to the English admiral of the Cinque Ports to receive Alexander of Argyll, his sons, John and Duncan, and Lachlan MacRuari with his wife, the daughter of Alexander of Argyll, to Edward's peace.³⁸ Whatever transpired in June failed to bring any definitive conclusion concerning the loyalties of the MacRuaris and MacDougalls; a few months later there were still serious doubts as to the loyalties of both when Angus Og MacDonald wrote to Edward I noting that he was with the king's navy stationed at Bute with Sir Hugh Bisset. He asked if Edward believed that Alexander of Argyll was to be trusted and if not, what the king's advice was for dealing with the man. Additionally, Angus petitioned the king to give the sons of Ruari their 'native feu' since they were with Angus, fighting with the king's forces; Angus Og reasoned that if the MacRuaris were allowed to hold their traditional patrimony they would serve the king faithfully.³⁹ Clearly, Angus Og and Hugh Bisset were hesitant to place trust in Alexander of Argyll without the king's express assurance. Conversely, Lachlan's submission to the English in June had failed to placate the suspicions of his royal lord, and the MacRuari cause was being advocated by the MacDonalds, despite the previous MacRuari alliance with the MacDougalls.

MacRuari ambitions during the First Scottish War of Independence seem to have rivalled that of their more studied cousins, the MacDonalds and MacDougalls. Evidence demonstrates that Lachlan and Ruari were fully capable of conducting offensive military campaigns, utilizing the advantage given by the imprisonment of the earl of Ross. Although they were defeated, the brothers proved to have considerable capabilities in resisting MacDonald punitive expeditions, and occasionally succeeded in outmanoeuvring their enemies.

The MacRuaris possessed a perceptive awareness of the political realities of the regional situation. Lachlan in particular had an opportunistic streak; his great success was his ability to carve alliances with both the MacDougalls and Comyns. Lachlan cultivated a long-

³⁷ Barrow identifies this Alexander Comyn as the brother of the earl of Buchan, see Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, 141. This seems accurate, since Sir Alexander Comyn of Buchan is definitely linked with Lachlan in 1304, see below, 62-63. However, the possibility remains that the 1299 Alexander Comyn could also have been the brother Lachlan's other ally, John, lord of Badenoch and Lochaber.

³⁸ Stevenson, *Documents*, ii, no. 610. This specifically mentions the marital alliance between Lachlan and Alexander of Argyll's daughter.

³⁹ Stevenson, *Documents*, ii, no. 615; *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1254.

standing association with his brother-in-law, Duncan MacDougall. In 1292 Alexander of Argyll had to publicly renounce his son Duncan and Lachlan for their recalcitrant activities.⁴⁰ This bond of friendship was sustained through the years and in 1297 when Lachlan escaped from Alexander of the Isles, he fled to Lochaber where the men of the region had sworn loyalty to Lachlan and Duncan.⁴¹ Lachlan's marriage to the daughter of Alexander of Argyll was a key move in securing her father's support and confirmed Lachlan's position as a regional power. The marriage underlined the bonds of friendship already formed between Lachlan and Duncan, but more importantly the marriage proclaimed Alexander of Argyll's support of this friendship. Evidence of this marriage may be seen as early as 1297 in the second correspondence of Alexander of the Isles to Edward I, in which he expressed his hesitancy to be near the lands of Alexander of Argyll because of the man's daughter.⁴² Given the context, this letter alludes to the marital alliance between Alexander MacDougall of Argyll and Lachlan MacRuari; by 1301, explicit evidence of this marriage survives.⁴³

Additionally, Lachlan fostered a strong relationship with the lord of Lochaber, John Comyn. The bonds of friendship were apparently so strong that Lochaber was where Lachlan found sanctuary from Alexander of the Isles. Here Lachlan could rely on considerable resources to aid him; in his letters to Edward I, Alexander of the Isles recounted how the men of Lochaber had sworn allegiance to Lachlan and Duncan MacDougall, son of Alexander of Argyll, to fight against the English king's peace.⁴⁴ While it is unclear if Lachlan was involved in the building of the two massive galleys at Inverlochy and the military engagement fought over them, it could be assumed that Lachlan continued to play an antagonistic part against Edward I and his regional lieutenants, the MacDonalds, in tandem with Alexander of Argyll and John Comyn of Lochaber, until 1301 when he accompanied his father-in-law and other members of his wife's family to submit to Edward I's peace. With both MacDougall and Comyn aligned with his interests, Lachlan faced substantially diminished resistance to his violent overtures in Skye, Lewis, and probably areas in Wester Ross. Contrary to the political situation during John Balliol's reign, when a crown-supported earl of Ross was able to mobilize his own forces to crush opposition to the sheriffdom of Skye, in 1297 Lachlan and Ruari faced

⁴⁰ *Foedera*, i, II, 761a.

⁴¹ Stevenson, *Documents*, ii, no. 445.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ii, no. 445.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, ii, no. 610.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ii, no. 445.

no strong magnate opposed to their ambitions; the earl of Ross was an English prisoner, and the countess of Ross was occupied with the activities of Andrew Murray in the east, while the MacRuairis could rely on alliances with the MacDougalls and the Comyns.

Ironically, it was his ties to Alexander of Argyll that brought Lachlan the unwanted attention of Alexander of the Isles and the power of the MacDonalds, complemented with the authority of the English king. While his Comyn/MacDougall alliances allowed for easier penetration of lands associated with Ross and secured the stability of MacRuairi lands, they also opened up a new vulnerability; Alexander of Argyll's attack on Alexander of the Isles in 1297 gave the MacDonalds the justification to attack the MacRuairis. This proved disastrous for the ambitions of Lachlan and Ruairi. Indeed, the intervention of the MacDonalds was probably the only serious military obstacle to MacRuairi expansion into Ross territory. Lachlan and Ruairi exhibited an aggressive strategy which targeted the patrimony of the earls of Ross, complemented by an adroit ability to align themselves with the MacDougall and Comyn families which negated any support from those quarters that the comital line of Ross may have expected. Lachlan MacRuairi had isolated the earldom of Ross on its southern borders through his alliances, and possibly had dialogue with Alexander Pilche and Andrew Murray through the MacDougall connections in the Aird, where men with MacDougall ties like Patrick Graham held significant power. Effectively, in 1297 the earldom of Ross was surrounded by a cordon of lords either cool or actively hostile, which seems to have been, to a large extent, engineered by Lachlan MacRuairi.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of Lachlan's success was the losses felt in the earldom of Ross. The MacRuairi attacks in the west and the uncomfortable presence of Andrew Murray within Ross in the east took its toll on the earldom. As Michael Brown suggests, the earl of Ross had refused to swear allegiance to the English king for seven years, and only the necessity of salvaging what was left of his weakened holdings dictated his giving of homage in 1303.⁴⁵ Earl William was finally issued his safe conduct back to Scotland in September 1303⁴⁶ and he returned via Berwick that October.⁴⁷ By order of the Edward I's council, the composition of Earl William's accompanying retinue was filled with notables to be retained at the king's cost until they reached Berwick, at which point the 'Londoners' were to return to London. The paramount concern of the council was the earl's security; four of the king's sergeants were to sleep outside the earl's sleeping quarters with two

⁴⁵ Michael Brown, *The Wars of Scotland, 1214-1371* (Edinburgh, 2004), 194.

⁴⁶ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1399 (c).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ii, no. 1401.

more sergeants sleeping within. In addition, at each town the earl stayed in during his journey two horsemen and two footmen were to guard the earl's chambers nightly with an additional six townsmen to guard him.⁴⁸

Rebuilding an Earldom 1304-1333

Upon his return to his earldom, Earl William was confronted with the difficulties of his severely reduced position of authority and the need to revitalize the core domains of his patrimony. Matters were further complicated by the lack of reliable allies. Prior to his imprisonment the earl was solidly within the ranks of the all-powerful Comyn bloc, with the assurance brought by a Comyn mother and a good relationship with John Balliol. The returned earl found himself amongst regional lords who were in constant states of realignment and turmoil in the wake of Edward I's assumption of overlordship of Scotland, and surrounded by neighbouring magnates who had recently plotted against his wife and the integrity of the earldom. Additionally, after his release in 1304 Earl William faced the difficult task of keeping within the English king's good graces in order to allow for the resuscitation of his earldom with minimal interference from the agents of Edward I. Significantly, the release of the earl of Ross during this period demonstrated the reliance Edward I placed on the earl to piece together some semblance of stability north of the Moray Firth. The earl of Ross was still regarded as the indispensable man in that area.⁴⁹

Although the MacRuari threat to Ross was somewhat mitigated by their defeat by the English-backed Alexander MacDonald in 1297, Lachlan MacRuari had spent the following years rebuilding his military strength and political position. Upon his return, Earl William was confronted by the worries of facing a rejuvenated Lachlan who was seemingly rescussitating his 1299 alliance with Sir Alexander Comyn. Sometime in 1304 John, earl of Atholl wrote to Edward I, requesting that the king reconsider his appointment of Alexander Comyn to hold Aboyne castle. The earl's reasons for this were many: the lands surrounding Aboyne were reportedly full of malcontents, presumably representing a populace rebellious to the authority of Edward and those trying to impose his will. Alexander Comyn already had the castles of Urquhart and Tarradale and the earl of Atholl believed that the addition of Aboyne had potentially detrimental possibilities. Furthermore, Lachlan and his friends were raising a large naval force; one 20-oar galley was to be

⁴⁸ Ibid., ii, no. 1395.

⁴⁹ TNA SC 8/177/8805, SC 8/137/6806.

provided per davoch of land. This information had been relayed to the earl of Atholl by William, earl of Ross, and Thomas of Dundee, the bishop of Ross. The earls were apprehensive of Lachlan's movements and objectives; they all advised that King Edward not give Aboyne to Alexander Comyn until Lachlan's intentions were better known.⁵⁰ Earl William was acutely aware of his own weak position upon his return and the establishment of accurate intelligence pertaining to the activities of the MacRuairis was a priority. Funnelling information about Lachlan and other potential threats common to himself and to English interests was the most immediate action the earl could take to fulfil his obligations to the English crown and to ensure his own preservation in Ross.

The particulars of why Alexander Comyn was viewed with such unease by these men remains vague, as does the nature of his ties to Lachlan. Lachlan's Comyn/MacDougall alliance may have meant that the apprehension of Atholl's communiqué may be interpreted as an unwillingness to trust the motives of Alexander Comyn: he and Lachlan were conceivably in league together. After all, it was likely this Alexander Comyn, the brother of the earl of Buchan, who had joined forces with Lachlan in 1299 to pillage northern Scotland. The alliance between Alexander Comyn and Lachlan would have threatened the balance of power in the north and had the potential to dislodge the earl of Ross. Lachlan's naval recruitment illustrated that MacRuairi resources were quite formidable in 1304, still very capable of raising a significant military force which presented enough of a threat to worry greatly neighbouring earls. Earl William would have been keenly aware of his own delicate predicament, having been so recently returned to his own earldom, but the earl's intelligence gathering demonstrated that within the first year of his return he had sufficiently ensconced himself within the region to be informed on events that affected his western flank.

Supplying information on Lachlan's current activities complemented Earl William's efforts to maintain the status of his earldom. Earl William invoked memory of Lachlan's recent transgressions as a mechanism in attempting to persuade the English crown to allow the earl to keep certain holdings. In another undated letter, probably also written in 1304, Earl William wrote to Edward I in the hope of defending his rights to the rents of the lands

⁵⁰ TNA SC 8/90/4461; *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1633. There has been some question as to the identity of the Lachlan in this document. In its summary of the manuscript TNA designated this Lachlan as Gillespie MacLachlan, a noble who held lands within the sheriffdom of Lorne, see *RPS*, 1293/2/17. Date accessed: 28 January 2013. However, the historical context indicates that the individual would more likely have been Lachlan MacRuairi, given his ability to raise a large naval force and instill fear in the earl and bishop of Ross. Additionally, MacRuairi's record for military conflict in this period would further point to this man.

of Dingwall and Ferincoskry which he claimed to have received from John Balliol. To accomplish this, the earl was willing to manipulate English fears and play upon the anxiety that Lachlan MacRuari caused; Earl William explained in his petition that Dingwall and Ferincoskry had been granted to him by John Balliol for quelling the rebelling chieftains of the isles, headed by Lachlan MacRuari, which success the earl claimed to have financed on his own accord.⁵¹

Ferincoskry has sometimes been confused with Ferintosh. This confusion seems to originate from the *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland* in which the editors translated the French handwriting as 'Ferincostri' but then identified this as Ferintosh, in the county of Nairn.⁵² Perhaps the editors were unaware of the place-name Ferincoskry, which was not commonly used past the medieval period. Inspection of the letter and the presence of Ferincoskry in 1308 documentation reveal that the 1304 letter refers to the place-name Ferincoskry on the north side of the Dornoch Firth, not Ferintosh. The value of these specific regions was based on their controlling points of the Cromarty Firth and Dornoch Firth respectively. In effect, the two locations dominated the southern and northern primary routes allowing overland access into the heartlands of the earldom of Ross.

If the earl was not fabricating his claim, then he had possession of Dingwall and Ferincoskry sometime in the 1290s. Earl William's possession of Dingwall might support the theory that he viewed Alexander Comyn as a rival for control of Dingwall, as Comyn's father had acted as bailie and sheriff of Dingwall between 1264 and 1266.⁵³ By keeping Lachlan MacRuari and Alexander Comyn ever within the minds of his superiors, and keeping Lachlan's reputation as an unruly element as a constant reminder, dangerous to the interests of the English crown, Earl William could leverage the situation to suit his own goals, especially since the danger that Lachlan posed was also a considerable worry to various other northern lords. Earl William made sure to note that he had used his own resources in this past campaign and his own ability to secure military victory, highlighting his own importance in maintaining the security of the region. Via petitions such as this, Earl William was able to reinforce doubts concerning Lachlan and Alexander Comyn, and promote himself in the eyes of the Edward I at the same time.

⁵¹ TNA SC 8/3/121; *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1631.

⁵² *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1631.

⁵³ *E.R.*, i, 19.

It seems that Earl William was supported in his actions by Thomas of Dundee, bishop of Ross, an adherent of the English cause in 1304. He and the Earl of Ross had warned John of Strathbogie, earl of Atholl of the movements of Lachlan MacRuari.⁵⁴ This loyalty lasted through to the end of 1307 when he was one of the bishops to whom Edward II wrote, requesting his support in keeping the peace in Scotland.⁵⁵ However, by the time William II, earl of Ross pledged fealty to Bruce, Bishop Thomas had also altered his allegiance as he was a sealer of the earl's pledge.⁵⁶ Thomas of Dundee may have had the early support of both Comyn and English governments, because when he had been a candidate for bishop, his opponent, Master Adam the precentor of Ross, quickly dropped out of the proceedings.⁵⁷

William's desire to control Dingwall and Ferincoskry reflected his more aggressive objective: to exploit the turmoil in Scotland to his own advantage and reassert Ross's dominance over neighbouring territory. Since MacRuari strength complicated Earl William's return to power in Argyll and Wester Ross, the primary targets of this policy were regions north of Ross, in Caithness and Sutherland. In Caithness opportunities were connected with the loss of ecclesiastical leadership. In the same year as the earl's release, the bishop of Caithness died.⁵⁸ The successor to the diocese was handpicked by Edward I: Farquhar Belegaumbe, the dean of Caithness. However, the bishop-elect was not able to gain access to his bishopric immediately and did not receive papal confirmation until 22 January 1306.⁵⁹ In this void Edward I placed the newly returned earl of Ross as guardian over the temporalities of the see. The guardianship of the diocese of Caithness was held by Earl William until 4 April 1306, when Edward I finally saw fit to order the earl of Ross to hand over the temporal possessions to the new bishop of Caithness, but only after Edward ensured the bishop held the temporalities from the English crown despite papal disagreement.⁶⁰ The brief guardianship held by Earl William was advantageous, because it allowed him access to the coffers of the Caithness temporalities; on 24 June 1304 the earl of Ross was handling the revenues of the bishopric.⁶¹ Perhaps more importantly, the earl's

⁵⁴ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1633.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, iii, no. 29.

⁵⁶ *RPS*, 1308/1. Date accessed: 18 November 2012.

⁵⁷ PoMS, H2/156/1, (<http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/source/7196/>; accessed 06/04/2013).

⁵⁸ Watt, *Fasti*, 79.

⁵⁹ *C.P.L.*, ii, 8.

⁶⁰ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1752; Watt, *Fasti*, 79, 83, 94. It is unknown why it took two years for Bishop Farquhar to receive permission from Edward I to take possession of his bishopric.

⁶¹ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1646.

claim to Ferincoskry, which had been held by the bishops of Caithness and their relatives in the previous century, was enhanced through a show of the earl's jurisdictional authority.

While the brevity of this guardianship may have been irksome for the earl, he may have found an ally in the new bishop.⁶² Farquhar certainly had ties with the English court: it was Edward I who had installed him as archdeacon of Caithness in July 1297.⁶³ His English loyalties were further cemented by his association with the Cheyne family, loyal retainers of Edward I since 1296, under whose patronage Farquhar had once held a parish, and he had been a canon of Aberdeen Cathedral under Henry Cheyne, bishop of Aberdeen.⁶⁴ Whatever the reason for the delay in his assumption of office, it was clear that the new bishop of Caithness was thought of as a supporter of the English crown, and this support transferred to Edward II following his father's death. Undoubtedly, Edward II envisioned a working relationship between the earl of Ross and bishop of Caithness. In December 1307 Edward II wrote a letter addressed to numerous bishops and lords which requested that they keep the peace while he was in France. Bishop Farquhar of Caithness and Earl William were amongst the list of notables.⁶⁵ The advent of a new bishop may have even strengthened the bonds between Ross and Caithness during a time of uncertainty when both the earl and the bishop were trying to negotiate the political difficulties presented by the military campaign of Robert Bruce.

Earl William's influence in Caithness was complemented by the secular authority he exercised in both Caithness and Sutherland where minors held comital title: John, earl of Caithness, had died by 1303 and his heir was a minor until after 1309;⁶⁶ the earl of Sutherland died before September 1307, also leaving a minor as heir. Wardship of Sutherland was given to John, son of the earl of Ross, and in 1307 the earl of Ross attempted to solidify his family's hold over Sutherland by petitioning the king to grant him the wardship since his son was not able to govern Sutherland properly himself.⁶⁷ With

⁶² G.W.S. Barrow hypothesized that the newly installed bishop of Caithness had a connection with the line of the earls of Ross; Farquhar was probably the son of a certain John Beleramb, who was witness to a 1249 act of the bishop of Moray, and suggests that Farquhar may have been given his Gaelic name by his father precisely as a result of this bond. See, G.W.S. Barrow, 'King Robert I and the Re-shaping of Northern Scotland', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 64 (2008), 141-158, 143-144.

⁶³ C.D.S., ii, no. 927.

⁶⁴ Barrow, 'King Robert I and the Re-shaping of Northern Scotland', 144-145; *Rotuli Scotiae*, i, 25; *Abdn. Reg.*, i, 37.

⁶⁵ C.D.S., iii, no. 29.

⁶⁶ Crawford, 'The Earls of Orkney-Caithness', 128.

⁶⁷ Fraser, *Sutherland*, i, 21; *ibid.*, iii, 10-11.

Sutherland and Caithness under his authority, the earl of Ross was able to greatly enhance his position in the north. This power was seen in 1307 when the earl of Ross was capable of gathering 3,000 men from Caithness, Sutherland, and Ross in preparation to fight Robert Bruce.⁶⁸

The lordship exercised by Earl William in the years following his return until his homage to Robert Bruce was characterized by consistent dialogue with the English crown to retain and improve upon relations that had been formed during the earl's stay in England; the earl was determined to ensure that his time in captivity had benefits. The earl was quick to adhere to the new administration and on 27 August 1304, he cooperated with the more mundane affairs of state when the baillery of the earl of Ross was handled by the constable of Invernairn.⁶⁹ While the earl began to reassert himself in the daily affairs of his earldom he was eager to send his sons to England to further both their futures and his own. Hugh, son of Earl William, spent a year in England on behalf of his father. This stay was financed by the English, though payment was not made until almost a year later; in April 1305 Hugh Ross received money for his maintenance during his stay,⁷⁰ and on 1 April 1307 the English crown paid Hugh daily for the period from 20 November 1305 through 19 November 1306, although the record notes that he only attended court for 75 days.⁷¹ On the same day the English king paid for Hugh's winter wardrobe and summer wardrobe, again noting that he was away from court at Whitsun.⁷²

Positive political engagement with the English crown bore fruit and by July 1306, Earl William was given control of Urquhart Castle, with the maintenance of the garrison being subsidized by the English crown.⁷³ The castles of Urquhart and Tarradale had previously been in the custody of Alexander Comyn in 1304, but since the earls of Ross and Atholl had cast doubt on the wisdom of allowing Alexander to hold important strongholds whilst Lachlan MacRuari was recruiting, the prospects of this man had plummeted.⁷⁴ Indeed, Earl William's inclusion in the earl of Atholl's 1304 petition to Edward I may have masked Earl William's ulterior ambition of acquiring Urquhart and Tarradale for himself. Both

⁶⁸ See below, 73.

⁶⁹ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1646.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, nos. 1662, 1666.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, v, no. 471b.

⁷² *Ibid.*, v, no. 472x

⁷³ *Ibid.*, v, no. 492xvi.

⁷⁴ See above, 62-63.

castles offered the earl of Ross strategic benefits and inroads into both Cromarty and the Aird; Tarradale in particular offered a valuable location due to its central point connecting these regions.

Earl William clearly had ambitions to accumulate power in the region; sometime after his release from captivity, Elizabeth Bisset, widow of Andrew of Bois and one of the three Bisset daughters who divided the Bisset inheritance, granted to Earl William the whole barony of Edirdouer [Redcastle] in its entirety. This included the patronage of the hospital of Edirdouer and the baronial castle. In exchange, Earl William granted to Elizabeth Bisset three davochs of land within the earldom of Ross. The importance of the land exchange was testified to by the number of witnesses present which included the abbot of Fearn and in addition to the seal of Elizabeth Bisset were the seals of the prior of Beaully, William Hay and William Fenton, lord of Beaufort.⁷⁵

This acquisition was a coup for the ambitious earl; the barony of Redcastle provided the earldom of Ross with territory in the Aird and within the Black Isle. This was a precursor to the lengthy acquisition of large portions of the Black Isle on the part of the earls of Ross which would follow in the reign of Robert Bruce.⁷⁶ The presence of nobles like William Fenton and William Hay testified to the importance of the transaction. Elizabeth Bisset had essentially created an opportunity for the earls of Ross to plant themselves in close proximity to the territories of the inheritors of the forfeited Bisset lordship of Lovat: the Fentons, Grahams, Chisholms, and the Airds. Strategically the barony of Redcastle and in particular its castle, was vital. It controlled the land route into the Black Isle and had a commanding position on the Beaully Firth. The castle had been one of two strategic strongholds built by William the Lion in his campaigns against the earl of Orkney in 1179. The davoch of Kilcoy – a part of the barony of Redcastle – was noteworthy, since sometime between March 1294 and March 1295, with the blessing of Elizabeth Bisset, Hugh Rose of Kilravock and his wife Mary, daughter of Elizabeth, leased this davoch to Sir David Graham, lord of Lovat, for a term of eight years.⁷⁷ Therefore, the earl of Ross became feudal lord – via his possession of the barony of Redcastle – over Kilcoy, to which the lords of Kilravock and the Grahams had a direct attachment.

⁷⁵ PoMS, H3/90/9 (<http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/source/7458>; accessed 06/04/2013). This most likely occurred after the earl's return to his earldom in 1303 and before Robert Bruce's campaign in the north in 1307.

⁷⁶ See below, 78-80.

⁷⁷ *Family of Rose*, 109-111.

The presence of the abbot of Fearn and the prior of Beaulieu further demonstrated the importance of this barony to the ecclesiastical community and the prominence that it played in linking the clergy in Ross and the Aird. Elizabeth Bisset's grant of Redcastle to the earl of Ross underlined previous associations that the earl and Ross clergy had with Redcastle and Bisset affairs. In September 1278 Elizabeth Bisset and her husband, Andrew *del Bois* [of Bois] granted to the priory of Beaulieu two marks annually, half of which to be given at Pentecost and the other at the feast of St. Martin, to be given at the castle of Redcastle. Earl William was a witness to this grant along with Robert of Fyvie, bishop of Ross, the dean of Ross, the chancellor of Ross, the succentor of Ross, the constable of Tarradale, the vicar of Redcastle and Isaac MacGillanders.⁷⁸

While the expansion of territorial holdings into the Aird and Cromarty peninsula was of value to the earl of Ross, it also exposed him to the complicated politics of the region. One of the more prolonged examples of these political dramas was the status of the church and church lands of Kiltarlity, just south of Beaulieu, near Beaufort Castle. In the early/mid-thirteenth century the bishop of Ross had disputed possession over the church and land of Kiltarlity. This ended in a compromise in which the bishop of Ross quitclaimed the church to John Bisset in exchange for Bisset quitclaiming the rights to the lands of the church. In addition, Bisset was to give 15 marks and a stone of wax annually for the fabric and altar of the church of St. Peter in Rosemarkie. This agreement was witnessed by many notables including several Bissets, clergy of Ross and Farquhar, earl of Ross.⁷⁹

However, this arrangement was short-lived; sometime between the years 1224 and 1226 John Bisset granted to the church of St. Peter of Rathven all his rights to patronage in the church of Kiltarlity. The interests of the bishopric of Ross were represented in this grant by the presence of the dean of Ross as one of the witnesses.⁸⁰ This was reinforced in June 1226 when John Bisset reiterated his earlier grant to the church of St. Peter to create a leper house of Rathven and Andrew, bishop of Moray, assigned a prior to the house and granted the hospital all its ecclesiastical rights. Again, the dean of Ross was a witness.⁸¹ In the following year the bishop of Ross gave up the portion of Kiltarlity that he had held from the earlier agreement with Bisset. In February 1227 the bishops of Ross and Moray agreed

⁷⁸ *Beaulieu Chrs.*, 63-64. Note the presence of Isaac MacGillanders, perhaps head of the clan *Gilleandrais* in the late thirteenth century.

⁷⁹ *Moray Reg.*, no. 258.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 71.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, no. 72.

to an exchange: Ross was to give Moray all of its rights to Kiltarlity in exchange for the church of Ardersier.⁸² These grants effectively brought Kiltarlity into the sphere of the bishopric of Moray, replacing the previous status quo.

By the late thirteenth century Kiltarlity continued to create discord in the Aird. Its proximity to the lands of the Fenton lords of Beaufort made it the centrepiece of William Fenton's ambitions, and it was the focus of a major feud between the bishop of Moray and the Fentons of Beaufort, a quarrel facilitated by the Grahams of Lovat. In September 1279 three members of the clergy, Robert of Fyvie, bishop of Ross, the dean of Ross and the prior of Beaully, who had been assigned by the Abbot of Deer to examine the dispute concerning Kiltarlity, found in favour of Archibald, bishop of Moray. These worthies then personally gave possession of Kiltarlity to the said bishop. Then the dean of Christianity of Inverness, the rector of Lundechty [Dunlichity] and the vicar of Wardlaw [Kirkhill] were ordered to travel with their chaplains to the castle of Beaufort and threaten William Fenton and his Bisset wife, the heiress Cecilia, with interdict and excommunication if they did not adhere to the decision that had been made and respect the authority of the bishop of Moray over Kiltarlity.⁸³ However, these threats did not seem to dissuade the Fenton lord of Beaufort; in August 1280 the bishop of Moray requested that the council of church prelates, which had convened at Perth, excommunicate William Fenton.⁸⁴

Sometime after this in an undated grant Archibald, bishop of Moray, leased the church lands of Kiltarlity including its lucrative fisheries to David Graham, lord of Lovat.⁸⁵ Once again William Fenton pressed his claims, angry that the bishop of Moray should choose the Grahams over himself. Later, Archibald, bishop of Moray acknowledged that there was a quarrel between William Fenton and David Graham over the land of Kiltarlity and the fishing rights on the Beaully River.⁸⁶ This was settled by the bishop by giving both men and their heirs the whole of the lands of the church of Kiltarlity and the fishing of Esse of the Beaully River in exchange for an annual sum for two years. Into this quagmire of legal and political conflict the earls of Ross were determined to exert their authority. The importance that Earl William placed on the Aird may have been defensive in nature. There might be

⁸² *Ibid.*, no. 75.

⁸³ *Moray Reg.*, no. 127.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 123.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 124. For further detail on the Fenton/Graham issues see *Beaully Chrs.*, 68-73.

evidence that Lachlan MacRuari had been interested in the Aird when in 1307 he requested from Edward I the lands of the Bruce supporter, Patrick Graham, son of David Graham.⁸⁷

With Redcastle in his possession, Urquhart and Tarradale became even more important to Earl William.⁸⁸ The political campaign to remove Alexander Comyn from his hold over Urquhart was successful; with Comyn viewed as being unreliable, the earl of Ross presented a better choice of guardian for this strategic stronghold. At the same time the earl's son, Hugh, and his retainers were sailing from Berwick back to Ross, their grain supply also supplemented by the English.⁸⁹ Hugh returned from England, his stay having apparently met with political success. In fact, the transfer of Urquhart Castle may have been a direct result of Hugh's transactions with the English crown during his year-long stay.

Hugh was not the only son of Earl William who spent extended time in England. On 13 March 1308 Walter, son of the earl of Ross, was a scholar at Cambridge with his expenses paid for by the English government.⁹⁰ In exchange for Earl William's release and favourable treatment for himself and his sons, the king of England required the earl to maintain the king's peace. In December 1307 the English king told the clergy and various secular magnates of Scotland, including Earl William, his son Hugh, and the bishop of Ross, to keep the peace, and the Scottish nobles to be loyal to the earl of Richmond.⁹¹ By 20 May 1308, the English crown was addressing Earl William as 'lieutenant of the guardian' when he was thanked for his good service, and was requested to remain stationed north of the Forth until the next midsummer.⁹²

Earl William's effort to revitalize his earldom was facilitated by the maintenance of frequent communication with the English crown. Indeed, there was a flurry of correspondence between Earl William and the English crown throughout the period immediately following the reinstatement of the earl to his lands. On 22 March 1306, a valet of the earl of Ross, Andre le Corour brought letters from the earl to the English king.⁹³

⁸⁷ *Beaully Chrs.*, 76. In this document Lachlan appears as 'Loughlan M'Lochery of the Isles'.

⁸⁸ Tarradale was granted to Hugh Ross at an unspecified date during the reign of Robert Bruce; see below, 80.

⁸⁹ *C.D.S.*, v, no. 492xvi.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 472q.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, iii, no. 29.

⁹² *Ibid.*, iii, no. 43.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, v, no. 472y.

Perhaps the most relied upon of these messengers was the same Christian of the Aird who had been captured with the earl at the Battle of Dunbar, and whose presence in the Aird was so essential for the stability of that region.⁹⁴ In 1306, Christian of the Aird surfaced again in official documentation, this time as messenger and valet to Earl William, relaying messages between the earl of Ross and Edward I.⁹⁵ On 7 September 1306, ‘Cristin Dulard’ was one of three of the earl’s valets who visited the English court with a gift of 3 falcons for the king.⁹⁶ On 24 October 1306, this time styled as ‘Cristinus de Lard’, this man was sent by the English king to deliver letters to the earl of Ross, Lachlan and Ruari MacRuari, and ‘John mak Nakyl’ [John MacNicol].⁹⁷ John MacNicol was leader of the MacNicol kindred based on the northern peninsula of Trotternish on the island of Skye. He further appeared in English records as one of the magnates in communication with the English court. Another document, undated but likely from around the same time in 1306, gave John MacDougall of Argyll, son of Alexander of Argyll, commissions to take charge of the king’s navy, and to negotiate peace with the MacDonalds, Patrick Graham, and ‘Johan M’Nakyl’.⁹⁸

The connection between the earls of Ross and the MacNicol is unfortunately obscure. However, the use of the earl of Ross as the conduit through which both the MacRuaries and the MacNicol received communication with the English court suggests that after the earl’s release in 1304 he brought northwest Argyll and the islands associated with the 1293 sheriffdom of Skye back into his sphere of influence. It seems probable that this was welcomed by the MacNicol, who were likely the earl’s local agents. It is doubtful that the MacNicol were inclined to view either the MacRuaries or the MacDonalds as allies, for hostilities were reported between the progeny of Somerled and the MacNicol in the twelfth century when MacDonald tradition holds that Somerled’s ally and father-in-law, Olaf the Red, killed MacNicol of North Uist.⁹⁹ Alasdair Maclean suggests that the MacNicol were hard pressed by the MacLeods and MacDonalds early on.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, it

⁹⁴ See above, 53-54.

⁹⁵ Presumably Christian was released from imprisonment at the same time as his lord, William, earl of Ross.

⁹⁶ *C.D.S.*, v, no. 472o.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 472w. This has been regarded as proof that the MacNicol kindred held an influential position in the region, see W.D.H. Sellar & Alasdair Maclean, *The Highland Clan MacNeacail (MacNicol)* (Waternish, Isle of Skye, 1999), 6-7.

⁹⁸ *C.D.S.*, iv, no. 1822. *C.D.S.* dates this document prior to November 1306.

⁹⁹ *H.P.*, i, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Alasdair Maclean, ‘Some Nicolson Traditions’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 57 (1993), 100-115 100-105.

is possible the MacNicol's preferred an association with the earldom of Ross. Indeed, MacDonald communication concerning MacRuari activities was replaced by information supplied by the earl of Ross, and upon his return to his earldom, Earl William attempted to reassert his authority in the west by acting in a role associated with having been the sheriff of Skye. In 1307, Earl William tried to obtain on behalf of the English king the moneys owed by Lachlan MacRuari. However, the earl's influence proved diminished as the MacRuari kindred continued to demonstrate its resolve to remain aloof and Lachlan MacRuari refused to pay.¹⁰¹

It was perhaps a combination of a sense of duty to Edward I, the motivation of self-advancement, and fear of a repetition of the events seen in 1297 with the Murray and MacRuari rebellions that drove Earl William to the act he would be most remembered for. In the summer of 1306 Robert Bruce had been defeated at Methven; in the aftermath of this defeat Bruce's wife fled into Ross and reached Tain, but while in the sanctuary of St. Duthac she and her retainers were captured by the earl of Ross and sent to Edward I.¹⁰² Barrow suggested that the party of Bruce followers captured in Tain were fleeing to Orkney where there was hope of protection through the dowager queen of Norway, Bruce's sister Isabel.¹⁰³

Bruce Campaign of 1307

As with so many magnates, the advent of Robert Bruce's resurgence in 1306-1307 saw the earl of Ross unprepared and willing to pursue a flexible stance until he could better ascertain the situation which confronted him. The earl of Ross described the events of Bruce's campaign in a letter to the English Crown: he had raised 3,000 men from Ross, Sutherland and Caithness and stationed them on the borders of these earldoms for a fortnight to resist Bruce's army. However, since Reginald Cheyne, warden of Moray, was absent and Cheyne's men refused to fight with the earl of Ross, the earl had been forced to negotiate a truce with Bruce.¹⁰⁴ The earl portrayed himself as loyal but unable to halt Bruce's advance due to the lack of dependable allies. In contrast, communication to the English crown by other nobles in the north of Scotland painted the earl of Ross as cowardly and instrumental in the failure to repel Bruce's assaults. The letter of Duncan of

¹⁰¹ C.D.S., iv, App., i, no. 14.

¹⁰² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 47; *Scotichronicon*, vi, 323.

¹⁰³ Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, 208.

¹⁰⁴ Fraser, *The Sutherland Book*, iii, 10-11; C.D.S., iv, App., i, no. 14; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, 226.

Frendraught contains several passages which add detail to Earl William's intentions and actions in response to Bruce's northern campaign. According to the letter, Earl William made a truce with Bruce shortly after Bruce had captured Inverlochy Castle, the stronghold of the Comyns of Badenoch which had been the initial conquest of Bruce's campaign in northern Scotland in 1307. William's refusal to break his truce with Bruce was blamed for the swift fall of the north. Duncan wrote that his father-in-law, Sir Gilbert of Glencarnie, was not properly supported because of Earl William's truce. Moreover, the earl had refused to include Sir Gilbert within his own truce. As a result, the castle of Inverness was levelled, the castle of Nairn was burnt, and Urquhart was taken and destroyed due to negligence. Only at Elgin was Duncan's brother-in-law, Gilbert of Glencarnie the younger, able to halt Bruce's aggression by the negotiation of a truce.¹⁰⁵

The earl of Ross remained determined to avoid military conflict and managed to maintain his truce during Bruce's northern campaign. Duncan's letter reflected this, stating that in the winter emissaries had been sent to Earl William to ask for his aid against Bruce, but the earl refused to break his truce. In turn, Bruce was reluctant to proceed with a general attack on Ross. It seems he contented himself with a surgical strike against Comyn interests in capturing Tarradale castle, which belonged to Alexander Comyn, destroying it and the immediate area, but no further. The letter stated that Earl William and his son, Hugh, were frightened of Bruce and retreated rather than facing him in battle.¹⁰⁶ It is interesting that according to this correspondence, Bruce only attacked Tarradale in Ross and that Earl William and Hugh tactically withdrew at the time. As noted earlier, in 1304 the earl of Ross had already tried to undermine Alexander Comyn's position through English fears of Lachlan MacRuari, and by 1306 Earl William had assumed control of Urquhart Castle, previously held by Alexander Comyn.¹⁰⁷ It may have been that during Bruce's action against Tarradale the earl of Ross and his son were not frightened so much of Bruce, as stated in Duncan of Frendraught's letter, but conveniently left Alexander Comyn's stronghold of Tarradale to the mercy of Bruce's army, thereby hoping to benefit by the Comyn's loss.

¹⁰⁵ Patricia M. Barnes and G.W.S. Barrow, 'The Movements of Robert Bruce between September 1307 and May 1308', *Scottish Historical Review*, 49 (1970), 46-59, 51-52, 57-59. *C.D.S.*, v, no. 517. The document itself is badly damaged, making it impossible to know which stronghold was dismantled. However, Barrow and Barnes strongly suggest that this had to be Inverness Castle, and there does not seem any reason to doubt this. It also means that Sir Gilbert had custody of Inverness Castle.

¹⁰⁶ Barnes and Barrow, 'The Movements of Robert Bruce', 52-53, 57-59; *C.D.S.*, v, no. 517.

¹⁰⁷ See above, 67.

An alternative interpretation of the earl's lack of confrontation with Bruce might be seen from the earl's own instability within his earldom; Andrew Murray's campaign in 1297 demonstrated that anti-English sentiment ran high in Ross. This does not seem to have altered a decade later, when Robert Bruce was about to begin his campaign to demolish Comyn power in the north. A letter written on 15 May 1307 to Edward II expressed the doubts of Duncan of Frenndraught, Reginald Cheyne, and Gilbert of Glencarnie that the men of Ross would remain loyal to them, preferring to join Bruce.¹⁰⁸ Colm McNamee hypothesised that allegiance to Bruce in the earldom must have been derived from MacRuari support and the remoteness of the region from English reprisal.¹⁰⁹ If true, then MacRuari influence over Ross territory must have been strengthening over an extended period of time, bridging the individual campaigns of Andrew Murray and Bruce and giving continuity to the pattern of loyalties within the region. The relative strength of MacRuari power in comparison to that of the earl of Ross was clearly demonstrated by the inability of the earl to force Lachlan MacRuari to pay Edward II's revenues in c. 1307-1308.¹¹⁰ It is possible that the earl of Ross was threatened as a growing number of lords in northern Argyll and Ross became sympathetic to overtures stemming from Lachlan MacRuari and Bruce.

Allegiance to Bruce: 1309-1333

On 31 October 1308, Earl William officially offered his loyalty to Robert Bruce. In addition to the earl's own seal the seals of his sons, Hugh and John, were attached along with those of the bishop of Moray and Thomas, bishop of Ross. Among the witnesses to this submission were men who were intimately involved with the earl of Ross: John Fenton and William de Hay. Recorded in the act of homage was Earl William's heritable infeftment in the lands of Dingwall and Ferincoskry.¹¹¹ These same lands had been the objective behind William's petition to Edward I in 1304, a demonstration of what continued to be the price for the earl's loyalty.

¹⁰⁸ *C.D.S.*, ii, no. 1926; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, 222.

¹⁰⁹ Colm McNamee, *The Wars of the Bruces* (East Linton, 1997), 43. This hypothesis seems to be based on disbelief that Bruce's military tactics alone could be responsible for the popular support for Bruce in the north described by Duncan of Frenndraught, Reginald Cheyne, and Gilbert of Glencarnie.

¹¹⁰ *C.D.S.*, iv, App., i, no. 14.

¹¹¹ *RPS*, 1308/1. Date accessed: 14 November 2012.

The earl's submission to Robert Bruce in 1308 was the beginning of a mutually beneficial relationship between the houses of Bruce and Ross which would continue until David II's release from English imprisonment in 1357. The earl survived the onslaught of Bruce's northern 1307-1308 campaign, remaining relatively untouched by the violence, despite Earl William's actions at Tain. Indeed, the earl benefited from the successes of Bruce; the removal of Comyn power in the north created a vacuum which allowed Earl William and his sons to incorporate additional lands into the earldom's patronage. Whatever loyalties Earl William may have held towards his Comyn relatives were immaterial compared to the possibilities of territorial gain with their elimination. In conjunction with the mounting military pressures coming from the MacRuaris and Bruce, and a lacklustre English support of the north, the leading figures in Ross were probably keen to attach themselves to the Bruce cause while Robert still had need of powerful allies for the future campaigns against English reprisals which were certain to come. Attachment to the Bruce cause offered opportunities of advancement, while temporarily taming the threat posed by the MacRuaris. The most tangible evidence of King Robert's engagement with Ross and the north was his tour of the northwest. In August 1309, King Robert had made his way to Loch Broom and here the king confirmed to William, thane of Cawdor, his thanage of Cawdor in Nairnshire.¹¹² The king continued his tour of the northwest and by the end of October he had reached Dunstaffnage.¹¹³

Throughout the reign of Robert Bruce, Earl William and his son, Hugh, were engaged in the proceedings of the government. In March 1309, they were with the king in St. Andrews amongst the ruling magnates of Scotland to attend an important meeting of parliament. On 16 March, both Earl William and Hugh were part of the group which wrote a collaborative letter to the king of France, Philip IV. This letter informed the French king that Scotland could not join France in a crusade until Scotland and Robert Bruce's kingship was secure.¹¹⁴ Earl William was also a participant in an additional letter to Philip IV, declaring faith in the rights and legitimacy of Robert Bruce to be king.¹¹⁵ The political ties between the earl and Robert I seem to have corresponded with a growing personal friendship between Earl William's scholarly son, Walter, and Robert I's brother, Edward Bruce, earl of Carrick. On 24 June 1314 Walter Ross was killed at the battle of Bannockburn, which

¹¹² *R.R.S.*, v, no. 9.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 10.

¹¹⁴ *RPS*, 1309/1. Date accessed: 14 November 2012.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1309/3. Date accessed: 14 November 2012.

according to John Barbour was a death greatly mourned by Edward Bruce.¹¹⁶ Soon after the battle Earl William and Hugh both were present for the November 1314 parliament at Cambuskenneth. This parliament was concerned with the status of those who were opposed to Robert Bruce and effectively disinherited them.¹¹⁷ The death of Walter described by Barbour, and the appearance of Earl William and Hugh with the king a few months later, indicates that these men played a part in the king's great victory; they certainly were demonstrating their pro-Bruce loyalties at Cambuskenneth as Robert I reached the zenith of his power.

Hugh was a witness to a royal charter at Arbroath in May 1315, which granted to Alexander Keith lands in Perthshire and at Tarbert on Loch Fyne.¹¹⁸ In December 1318, Earl William and Thomas, bishop of Ross, participated in Robert I's parliament at Scone which entailed the crown upon the heirs of Robert Bruce. In the event that the king did not have an heir of his own, then the crown was to go to Robert Stewart, son of Sir Walter and the king's daughter, Marjory. If the king died whilst the heir was a minor then Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray and lord of Man, was named guardian and tutor to the heir. The death of Randolph would in turn pass the position of guardian and tutor to James Douglas.¹¹⁹ Finally, in April 1320 Earl William was involved in the deliberations regarding the Declaration of Arbroath and was one of the magnates who attached his seal to this document.¹²⁰

It was clear by the creation of the regality of Moray that Thomas Randolph was intended to assume the position as key man in the north of Scotland. In 1312 Robert I granted to Thomas Randolph the earldom of Moray with much expanded holdings which included Lochaber, and the northern marches of Argyll held by the earl of Ross. All of these lands were held in free regality.¹²¹ Exactly how Earl William and his son Hugh felt about portions of their patrimony being held under this regality remains unclear. However, King Robert's treatment of Hugh Ross signified that he was marked for advancement as well. What was probably envisioned by the king was a working relationship between Randolph and Hugh. The lands of the earls of Ross would expand, but some of these new lands

¹¹⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 504-505.

¹¹⁷ *RPS*, 1314/1. Date accessed: 14 November 2012.

¹¹⁸ *R.R.S.*, v, no. 69.

¹¹⁹ *RPS*, 1318/30. Date accessed: 14 November 2012.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1320/4/1. Date accessed: 14 November 2012.

¹²¹ *R.R.S.*, v, no. 389.

would be under the overlordship of Randolph's regality of Moray. Within Moray itself, Hugh Ross received an important grant: the lands of Nairn, including the burgh, were granted to Hugh and new wife, Maud Bruce, the king's sister.¹²² The grant of Nairn given to Hugh extended control into eastern territories, the burgh itself being of great economic value.

Although Hugh Ross would not rival Thomas Randolph, the reign of Robert Bruce was a boon for the fortunes of William II and his sons, Hugh and John. Hugh Ross had the marked honour of being married to Maud Bruce, whilst his brother John was married to Margaret Comyn, niece of the earl of Buchan and co-heiress of the earldom.¹²³ Even more prominent was the relationship of Robert I with Hugh; the dynamics between these two men would shape the development of Ross for the rest of the fourteenth century. Hugh Ross was a man seasoned as a leader in Ross at an early age due to his father's imprisonment after the battle of Dunbar. He appears to have led his mother's army in the defence of Urquhart Castle against Andrew Murray and Alexander Pilche and then played a prominent diplomatic role in the court of Edward I. Indeed, Hugh's earlier dealings with the English court may have prepared him for his successes at Robert I's court. Hugh's position of favour with the king found its expression in the number of grants of land Robert I made to Hugh.

One grant in particular was noteworthy: on 5 December 1315, Hugh was granted the sheriffdom and burgh of Cromarty.¹²⁴ Two days later letters were issued to Hugh guaranteeing the earlier grant of the sheriffdom and burgh of Cromarty by promising warrandice of the grant.¹²⁵ In March 1316, Hugh was again granted the burgh of Cromarty and the respective annual due.¹²⁶ While possession of the sheriffdom and burgh of Cromarty greatly enhanced the power and prestige of the earls of Ross, the king's generosity also brought Hugh into conflict with William Mowat, the hereditary sheriff of Cromarty, whose family had held this sheriffdom, and six davochs of land, since 1264.¹²⁷ Robert I's initial 1315 grant to Hugh Ross of Cromarty removed William Mowat from his

¹²² *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix i, no. 8. The date of this marriage is unknown; according to one source it occurred in 1308, see *S.P.*, vii, 236. The marriage definitely occurred by 1323 when Maud appears in a confirmation grant to Hugh; see, *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix ii, no. 55; *R.R.S.*, v, no. 246.

¹²³ *R.M.S.*, Appendix i, no. 8; Appendix ii, nos. 17, 49; Barrow, *Robert Bruce*, 353.

¹²⁴ *R.R.S.*, v, no. 77.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 78.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 86.

¹²⁷ *E.R.*, i, 26.

heritable office. This seems to have provoked Mowat, and the letter of warrandice issued two days later by the king was probably either a pre-emptive tactic or a reaction to Mowat's contentions to this grant. Whatever actions William Mowat took in response to this blatant undermining of his position were unsuccessful. He could neither persuade the king to rethink this grant nor come to an understanding with Hugh Ross. The 1316 grant of Cromarty specifically addressed the rights of William Mowat as sheriff of Cromarty and gave them to Hugh Ross.

The cause of the king's animosity towards William Mowat may have been grounded in a perceived lack of loyalty. A.A.M. Duncan has speculated that William Mowat may have deserted Bruce after the Battle of Methven and that this was Robert I's reason for replacing him with Hugh Ross.¹²⁸ By May 1321 William Mowat gave up trying to defend his position under the Bruce kingship and deserted; he switched his allegiance to the English king, Edward II.¹²⁹ Finally Hugh Ross could claim his new sheriffdom and burgh of Cromarty unimpeded. This was apparent by a third grant of the burgh of Cromarty in September 1323, to Hugh, by this time earl of Ross, with the inclusion of Hugh's wife, the king's sister Maud.¹³⁰ Clearly the burgh of Cromarty was a key component of Robert I's restructuring of the north and a priority for Hugh Ross. With these grants the earls of Ross gained effective control of the Cromarty Firth; the earldom of Ross was on the north bank and the sheriffdom of Cromarty on the south bank of the firth. With the Cromarty Firth in hand, Hugh Ross could offer his father, Earl William, the benefits of an enhanced access to economic and logistical prosperity. In particular, the Cromarty Firth connected the burgh of Cromarty with Dingwall. These grants thereby facilitated the flow of commerce through this waterway which was now firmly in the hands of the ruling family of Ross.¹³¹

It is interesting to note the treatment of burghs by King Robert in his grant of Moray to Thomas Randolph. Invernairn, Forres and Elgin were acknowledged as held by the king but that at present they held their liberties from Thomas Randolph. Inverness was reserved, to be held directly from the king, bypassing Randolph's authority. Similarly, the granting

¹²⁸ A.A.M. Duncan suggests that William Mowat shifted his loyalties after Methven but acknowledges that he did not make an appearance in either Scottish or English records, making the nature of his relationship with Bruce immediately after 1306 open to interpretation; see *R.R.S.*, v, 74.

¹²⁹ *C.D.S.*, iii, no. 735.

¹³⁰ *R.R.S.*, v, no. 246.

¹³¹ Hugh had learned first hand the strategic value of controlling the Cromarty Firth, as he and his mother had seen Andrew Murray build a base that straddled both sides in 1297, a waterway that offered unparalleled logistical mobility in the region.

of Cromarty and Nairn to Hugh Ross demonstrated a pattern of outsourcing burghs to the two noblemen whom the king relied upon to maintain the king's peace in the huge swathe of lands stretching uninterrupted from Buchan in the east through Badenoch and the earldom of Ross to Lochaber and northern Argyll in the west. The grants of burghs complemented the extensive territory that Robert I gave to these men, effectively increasing their financial base exponentially.

The king's policy of strengthening the position of Hugh Ross continued: he was granted Tarradale and Inverfren.¹³² Tarradale gave him an important strategic holding that had probably been a target of the earl of Ross and his son since 1304 when Earl William tried to discredit Alexander Comyn, and in 1307 when the earl and his son passively aided in the destruction of Comyn power by neglecting to defend Tarradale from Robert Bruce's army. With the burgh of Cromarty on the northern extremity of the Black Isle peninsula and Tarradale at the southern end, standing guard over the Beaully Firth, Hugh effectively gained control of the strategic points of the Black Isle. These grants also brought the earls of Ross into closer proximity to the magnates in the Aird. Furthermore, Hugh was granted Strathglass and Strathconan,¹³³ bolstering the integrity of the northern border of Ross.

Hugh Ross stood out as one of the king's favourites, both in marriage and in land grants. Perhaps as a testament to the strengthening Ross/government ties, Robert I reinforced Earl William's hold over Dingwall and Ferincoskry, issuing a charter to Earl William of these lands in August 1321 which also included the rent of two merks from the moorland of Strathconan. In exchange, the earl was to maintain six chaplains in Tain for the saying of masses for the deceased Alexander III and John, earl of Atholl at the chapel of St. Duthac.¹³⁴ Again, Dingwall and Ferincoskry featured as important locations for Ross to secure. The continued allowance of the earl of Ross to hold northern lands that were a part of the earldom of Sutherland demonstrated a marked continuity of policy by King Robert, demonstrating the king's willingness to engage with Balliol's earlier grants and a readiness to continue Edward I's policy of allowing Ross expansion at the expense of Sutherland.

In January 1323 Earl William died at Delny.¹³⁵ Hugh, as earl of Ross, continued to attend his king often. His attendance underlined his priorities as being concerned with Buchan,

¹³² *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix ii, index A. 64.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, A. 65.

¹³⁴ *R.R.S.*, v, no. 196.

¹³⁵ *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 23.

courtesy of his brother's marriage. On 28 March 1324, Earl Hugh was in Aberdeen as witness to a charter by the king granting to a certain Thomas 'de Carnoto' ten merks annually from Ury [in Kincardineshire] which previously Earl Hugh had resigned two-thirds of.¹³⁶ This portion of Ury had been a part of Earl Hugh's inheritance from his brother John. The following year Earl Hugh was at the king's side in Scone, ensconced in affairs associated with his eastern holdings. King Robert granted Ardoch and Skeith in the barony of Deskford, in Banffshire, to Christian of the Aird on 27 March 1325; the regional importance of this grant is perhaps demonstrated by the witness list in which Earl Hugh, Thomas Randolph and James Douglas were present.¹³⁷ Christian of the Aird had served the earls of Ross since 1297, and it seems that this grant rewarded his loyalty to the earls; his association with Ross was highlighted by the location of Deskford and its proximity to Earl Hugh's own holdings in Buchan. Earl Hugh was strengthening his own position by advocating the elevation of men with proven loyalties.

On 10 January 1326, Earl Hugh was in Arbroath attending the king and was witness to a charter granted by King Robert to Melrose Abbey. Earl Malise of Strathearn and James Douglas were also present.¹³⁸ The earl of Ross seems to have stayed with the king for the duration of the winter and was present at Scone when King Robert inspected a charter to Scone abbey dated in the reign of Malcolm IV. Again, Malise, earl of Strathearn, and James Douglas were fellow members of the witness list. This time they were joined by Gilbert de Hay and Gilbert, the bishop of Sodor.¹³⁹ On 4 March 1328 Earl Hugh was in Edinburgh with King Robert, acting as a witness to another of the king's charters along with Roger, bishop of Ross.¹⁴⁰ Hugh continued his stay with the king throughout that month, participating in the affairs of state; he was included in the indenture of a treaty between Bruce and Edward III dated 17 March.¹⁴¹ Earl Hugh appears again within the notarial instruments of March 1328, concerned with Bruce's promise to pay damages and to submit to the jurisdiction of the papal courts.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ *R.R.S.*, v, no. 252.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 270.

¹³⁸ *R.R.S.*, v, no. 288.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 291.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 336.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, no. 342.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, no. 345.

During this period, Robert I also granted - in an undated charter - the island of Skye to Hugh and then, more specifically, the peninsula of Trotternish in Skye.¹⁴³ These grants signified the resumption of Ross control over Skye that had been lost during the 1297 MacRuari attacks and the subsequent MacDonald presence. It is plausible that the presence of Clan Donald power in Skye and Lewis had been sustained after the fighting of 1297. This was demonstrated later in 1336 when John MacDonald used the Balliol resurgence to claim both Skye and Lewis, which Edward Balliol acceded to in an indenture.¹⁴⁴ The grants of Skye and Trotternish by Robert I to Hugh Ross restored the lordship of Skye to the earls of Ross. This must have been hard for the MacDonald lords to swallow in lieu of their faithful service to Robert I, but significantly, the MacDonald tenure over Skye and Lewis had its foundation in the MacDonald enforcement of the authority of the English king, Edward I, a status quo unacceptable with the success of the Bruce cause. The restoration of Skye to the line of the earls of Ross, and the specific grant of lordship of Trotternish, meant that Hugh Ross exercised lordship over traditional MacNicol lands, a status that perhaps had precedent when Hugh's father, Earl William, had connections with the MacNicol.¹⁴⁵

Robert I had facilitated a territorial expansion for the earls of Ross that had been uninterrupted since 1309, and that had resulted in the earldom becoming a dominant force in the north alongside Thomas Randolph's regality of Moray. However, there was still one obstacle to Earl Hugh's complete dominance of the Aird and Cromarty regions: control of the barony of Avoch. In this Earl Hugh found himself at odds with Sir Andrew Murray of Petty and Bothwell, husband to Christina Bruce - another of Robert I's sisters - and son of the Andrew Murray who had distressed Earl Hugh's mother so much in 1297. In the aftermath of the death of the first Andrew Murray, and the reassertion of English authority in the north, the barony of Avoch was a target for Hugh. In c. 1307-1308 he petitioned the new English king, Edward II, claiming that Edward I had previously granted to Hugh the barony of Avoch, since the last lord had been a rebel and traitor, and Hugh wanted further recognition of this grant.¹⁴⁶ With the establishment of Robert Bruce as king, Hugh Ross found his claim to Avoch challenged by the heir of the Murray estates, Sir Andrew Murray

¹⁴³ *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix ii, nos. 61, 63. Charters are missing and undatable.

¹⁴⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 1.

¹⁴⁵ See above, 72-73.

¹⁴⁶ *C.D.S.*, iv, App., i, no. 14. The barony of Avoch briefly came under the control of David Barklay, as noted by this petition, but the barony's link to the Murrays was revived by Sir Andrew Murray of Bothwell.

of Bothwell. Since Hugh Ross's claim to Avoch rested on the assertion that the first Andrew Murray had been a rebel against the English, it was probably difficult for Hugh to substantiate his claim to Robert I. In 1328, Earl Hugh and Andrew Murray were arguing over the barony of 'Lanach' [Avoch] which was recorded as being a part of Ross by this time.¹⁴⁷ The tensions between these two men continued and by 3 July 1328 the disagreements spilled over to include disputes over the lands of Munloch, and 'Dromcudyn', located in Knockbain and Kirkmichael parishes.¹⁴⁸ The results of these proceedings were left unclear, but it seems that Sir Andrew Murray of Bothwell won at least a temporary victory as he was in Avoch upon his death in 1338.¹⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Earl Hugh may have continued to exercise strong influence in Avoch through the Roses of Kilravock. The Roses of Kilravock's interest in the barony of Avoch stemmed from a marriage: William Rose, son of Hugh Rose, married Muriella of Doune, daughter of Andrew of Doune. This family held land within the barony of Avoch from Sir Andrew Murray; when this Muriella of Doune was a widow, she gave to her second son - another Andrew - her portion of these lands in Avoch with the permission of John Murray, lord of Bothwell and Avoch.¹⁵⁰ In turn the Roses of Kilravock were closely tied to the earls of Ross, as the lords of Kilravock held their portion of Kilcoy, a portion of the barony of Redcastle, from the earls of Ross.¹⁵¹ In June 1333 William Rose was in Balconie - the other significant Murray stronghold in 1297 but now firmly within the power of the earl of Ross - attending Earl Hugh who issued a discharge to the lord of Kilravock.¹⁵²

Lords in the Aird, such as the Frasers of Lovat, were also cultivated by Earl Hugh. The Fraser chronicle account states that the widow of the second Fraser lord of Lovat, pregnant with her third son, was entrusted to the care of Hugh, earl of Ross, by Robert I, whereupon the earl took such good care of the widow that he was named godfather of the newborn child and he was named Hugh; the source goes as far as to state that the name Hugh originally came to be used by the Frasers in honour of the earl of Ross. This Hugh Fraser had his marriage orchestrated by his godfather to Euphemia Dingwall, daughter of the baron of Kildun, giving the earl a close adherent in the region of Tain. Meanwhile, Simon,

¹⁴⁷ *O.P.S.*, ii, 543; *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix ii, no. 694.

¹⁴⁸ *O.P.S.*, ii, 538; *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix ii, no. 702.

¹⁴⁹ *O.P.S.*, ii, 543.

¹⁵⁰ *Family of Rose*, 116-117.

¹⁵¹ See above, 68.

¹⁵² *Family of Rose*, 115.

third lord of Lovat reportedly married Julia Ross, the earl's sister. Finally, Earl Hugh was made the godfather of Hugh, the future fourth lord of Lovat.¹⁵³ If the *Wardlaw MS* is accurate, Earl Hugh played a pivotal role in the development of the Frasers of Lovat and orchestrated their connections to the comital line and to other important kindreds in Ross like the Dingwalls.

Robert I died on 7 June 1329,¹⁵⁴ and with his death war with England and the disinherited Scottish nobility headed by Edward Balliol followed. Initial Balliol successes were short-lived, but reinforced by the English king, Edward III, the inheritance of Robert I's son, David was threatened; the seriousness of the threat was made evident when David Bruce fled to France in 1334.¹⁵⁵ In this struggle Earl Hugh remained faithful to the Bruce loyalties he had cultivated since 1308. This loyalty proved his downfall when on 19 July 1333 Earl Hugh was killed in battle when the Bruce-loyalist army suffered defeat at Halidon Hill trying to lift Edward III's siege of Berwick.¹⁵⁶ Apparently, George Munro, lord of Foulis was killed with his lord.¹⁵⁷

The Establishment of Hegemony 1333-1357

The demise of Earl Hugh at Halidon Hill left the earldom to his son, William III. However, according to the Ross chronicle, William did not exercise his rights as earl until 1336 because he had been banished to Norway. Upon his return to Scotland he took the role of military leader, successfully taking Perth from the English, and removing all English sympathisers from Ross.¹⁵⁸ If this is accurate, then William seems to have been a target of the Balliol faction after Halidon Hill, and demonstrated himself as a prominent supporter of David Bruce. Barbara Crawford seems to accept William's presence in Norway, but suggests that his reasons for being there were far less romantic than banishment for loyalty to David Bruce; she interpreted William's stay in Norway as a mission to help consolidate his brother-in-law, Malise, earl of Strathearn's recent inheritance of the earldoms of Caithness and Orkney.¹⁵⁹ Regardless of why he was in Norway, William does seem to have

¹⁵³ *Wardlaw*, 76-77, 78.

¹⁵⁴ *Scotichronicon*, vii, 44-45.

¹⁵⁵ For analysis on the war see; Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 232-254; Michael A. Penman, *David II* (East Linton, 2004), 37-75.

¹⁵⁶ *Chron. Lanercost* (Maxwell), 278-281; *Scotichronicon*, vii, 92-93.

¹⁵⁷ Gordon, *Sutherland*, 46; *Munro Tree*, 3, J.

¹⁵⁸ *Chron. Ross*, 6, 9.

¹⁵⁹ Crawford, 'The Earls of Orkney-Caithness', 171.

joined Bruce forces, playing a prominent role in defeating the pro-Balliol David Strathbogie, earl of Atholl, at Culblean in 1335.¹⁶⁰

William's absence in Norway and subsequent military campaigning meant that practical rule of the earldom was probably delegated to Earl William's half-brother and Earl Hugh's son by his second wife Margaret Graham: Hugh, lord of Philorth. Hugh seems to have been a favourite of his father. Before his death, Earl Hugh had made large grants to his son Hugh in both Buchan and Ross. On 10 May 1333 Hugh was granted lands in Buchan which included the manor of Philorth. In Ross he was granted the four davachs of Rarichie, and all the lands which had formerly belonged to Margaret Ross excepting her manor of Kingedward.¹⁶¹

Evidence regarding the activities of both Earl William and Hugh of Philorth for the rest of the 1330s has not survived, but with the return to Scotland of David II the earl surfaces, making regular appearances at the king's court. In September 1341 Earl William was in Scone attending David II's parliament and witnessing several acts.¹⁶² On 5 November the earl accompanied the king to Lanark.¹⁶³ In June 1342 Earl William, with Roger, bishop of Ross, was on the king's council at Restenneth.¹⁶⁴ On 1 May 1343 Earl William was with the king in Aberdeen dealing with matters regarding the sheriffdom of Elgin, accompanied by his ally Robert Keith, the marischal.¹⁶⁵ On 22 November 1345 the earl and bishop of Ross were with the king in Elgin to witness affairs regarding the sheriffdom of Banff.¹⁶⁶ Earl William's activities seemed to have been focused on cultivating a good relationship with the royal government, and resembled his father's attachment to Robert I.

While the earl cultivated relationships at court, his friendship with Malise, earl of Strathearn, paid off in 1344 when Strathearn gave the earl of Ross custody of Isabella, his official heiress. This custody included the right of choosing a husband for Isabella.¹⁶⁷ This

¹⁶⁰ *Chron. Lanercost* (Maxwell), 294. *Scotichronicon* makes no reference to the earl of Ross being one of the leaders, but instead lists Andrew Murray as leader, see *Scotichronicon*, vii, 114-117.

¹⁶¹ NRS GD 297/161, 297/165, 297/167. While Hugh has come down through history as the founder of Clan Ross (the Rosses of Balnagown), the title most associated with him is as the lord of Philorth, denoting a preoccupation with lordship in Buchan.

¹⁶² *R.R.S.*, vi, nos. 33, 34, 37.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, no. 38.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, nos. 52, 53.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 68.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 99.

¹⁶⁷ *R.M.S.*, i, app. i, no. 150.

was the catalyst for William III and Hugh of Philorth to dominate Caithness to such an extent that, as Barbara Crawford has suggested, these men could act with an independence of the crown matching that of the previous Norse earls.¹⁶⁸

If the earl of Ross was trying to repeat his father's friendly relations with the Bruce dynasty, they were soiled by the earl's actions in October 1346. David II decided to proceed with a major offensive against England; but when the royal army mustered at Perth in September the earl of Ross murdered Ranald MacRuari at Elcho Priory and then deserted the army.¹⁶⁹ David II continued with his invasion of England, but was defeated and captured at the battle of Neville's Cross.¹⁷⁰ Although evidence of the MacRuari relationship with Ross after Lachlan MacRuari's conflicts with Earl William II does not survive past 1307, it seems that the murder of Ranald MacRuari at Elcho was the culmination of issues that dated back at least to the time of William's grandfather in 1293.

The capture of David II at Neville's Cross was an important factor in the subsequent growth in power of the earl of Ross and the lord of Philorth because their activities were not restricted by a centralising monarch. The 1350s saw the brothers consolidate and expand their positions. Michael Penman has noted that in 1350 there is evidence that a triumvirate of the earls of Ross, Mar, and the lord of Douglas overthrew the Steward as guardian. Ross's opposition to Stewart derived from a range of issues: wanting to safeguard his justiciarship after quarrelling with Stewart over control of revenues; repairing relations with David II in the wake of taking over parts of the now deceased Randolph's earldom of Moray and deserting the king in 1346; feeling threatened by Stewart's expansion into Badenoch and Strathearn; finally, the July 18 1350 marriage of John MacDonald of Islay to the daughter of Stewart was a potential anti-Ross alliance.¹⁷¹ However, this triumvirate was short-lived due to all three members serving their own needs. Stewart actively tried to make his peace with Ross, resulting in his marriage in 1355 to Euphemia, sister of Earl William.¹⁷² This marriage could have been a solution to the tensions between Earl William and Stewart in Badenoch; the *Wardlaw MS* states that Hugh

¹⁶⁸ Crawford, 'The Earls of Orkney-Caithness', 130.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

¹⁶⁹ *Scotichronicon*, vii, 252-253.

¹⁷⁰ *Chron. Lanercost* (Maxwell), 330-342; *Scotichronicon*, vii, 252-261.

¹⁷¹ Penman, *David II*, 157-158.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 168.

Fraser, fourth lord of Lovat and possibly the earl's cousin, was ordered by the earl to escort Euphemia to marry the 'king'.¹⁷³

A significant part of Earl William's prominence relied on the bond between William and his brother Hugh, and a heavy investment in the power of the lord of Philorth. On 30 April 1350, Earl William appointed Hugh to be his heir; this occurred with the consent of their sister Margaret, the countess of Caithness and Orkney, the support of the free tenants of the earldom, and had the condition that the king must assent to this agreement.¹⁷⁴ Boardman notes that this type of comital affirmation was important in the legitimising process, and was used in 1404 by Alexander Stewart, son of the lord of Badenoch, in his plan to obtain the earldom of Mar.¹⁷⁵ David II's assent to this tailzie must have seemed likely prior to his release since Earl William and Hugh were both strong adherents of the king during his imprisonment, and both were instrumental in the treaty negotiations of David II and Edward III. In an unusual and secretive correspondence, probably dated from early 1351, Edward III voiced his hopes to his commissioner of the northern border, Sir Ralph Neville, concerning the use of a "Sir Hugh" to learn the dispositions of the "Earl of R" and "WD" towards the new offers of David II's release. Contained within was speculation of the possibility that Ross, in collaboration with the earl of Mar and the Lord Douglas, could lead the resistance against the Steward in the eventuality that a civil war began due to the Steward's opposition to proposed terms for the release of David II.¹⁷⁶

The implications of this communication are far-reaching. Earl William is confirmed as a considerable power in Scotland, and his credibility as a viable conduit for influencing the negotiations of David II's release is revealed. In addition, Edward III's communications unveiled that Hugh, lord of Philorth, transcended his own regional centre of power and was seen as a valuable asset to both the English and Scottish courts in negotiations. Indeed, the English king's letter reveals that Hugh was viewed as far more than a potentially valuable hostage to be exchanged for David II's freedom; he was a key player in shifting the political alignments of superior lords. In particular, Hugh seemed to fill the role of being the primary contact of informational exchange between Douglas, Mar, Ross, David II and

¹⁷³ *Wardlaw*, 82. This account mistook Euphemia for William's daughter, rather than his sister, and mistakenly identifies the Stewart as already king during this period.

¹⁷⁴ NRS GD 297/163.

¹⁷⁵ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 264-265.

¹⁷⁶ Penman, *David II*, 163-164; A.A.M. Duncan, "Honi soit qui mal y pense": David II and Edward III, 1346-52', *Scottish Historical Review*, 67 (1988), 113-41, 121-3; C.J. Johnson, 'Negotiations for the Ransom of David Bruce in 1349', *English Historical Review*, 36 (1921), 57-58.

the English court. The communication highlights what is already clear from charter evidence: that Hugh was extremely valuable to his brother William and that Hugh possessed the ability to stand on an equal footing with his brother in terms of diplomatic status.

The conviction Earl William placed in his brother, the new heir to the earldom, was apparent. In January 1351 Hugh was acting as his brother's lieutenant in the earldom when he inspected and ratified charters previously granted by Hugh's father and brother to William Marshall and his wife, Marion Hermiston, of the lands of Balnagown, 'Achwale' and the 6 mark annual rent of Tarbat.¹⁷⁷ On June 29 1351 Hugh's status as a major lord in the earldom was enhanced when the earl granted him Strathcarron, Strathoykel, and Westray.¹⁷⁸ This grant made the lord of Philorth the most powerful man in northern Ross, effectively controlling the earldom's border with Sutherland. In turn Hugh seems to have placed his own men as tenants in the north, as seen when he granted to his retainer, William Marshall, lands in Westray.¹⁷⁹ Hugh's importance in northern Ross was paired with gains in the south; on 9 July 1357 Earl William granted Hugh the land of Munloch, ¹⁸⁰ a strategic position on the Black Isle. By the end of the 1350s the lord of Philorth had lands stretching from northern Ross to Buchan, a power rivalled by few in the north. The accumulated land and wealth accrued by Hugh was complemented by his office as deputy to the justiciar north of the Forth, which allowed him to reach beyond his own lands and extend his influence throughout northern Scotland. It was recorded that Hugh Ross and another deputy sheriff of Perth by 1361 had 'deforced' money from the Perth ayre in 1358-9, according to the sheriff of Perth, a Stewart retainer, John Danielston. Penman suggests that this was a front for Stewart to funnel money to his allies, one of whom was Earl William.¹⁸¹

The Return of the Wrathful King 1357-1372

On 3 October 1357 the treaty of Berwick was signed, and with it the release of David II from English captivity.¹⁸² This must have worried both Earl William and Hugh of Philorth

¹⁷⁷ NRS GD 297/169.

¹⁷⁸ NRS GD 297/173.

¹⁷⁹ NRS GD 297/190.

¹⁸⁰ NRS GD 297/162.

¹⁸¹ Penman, *David II*, 217.

¹⁸² *Scotichronicon*, vii, 304-305.

as they had capitalised on David's absence since Earl William had deserted the king's army in 1346. A year after David II resumed his reign he began taking actions that seemed to reflect animosity towards the earl. On 18 November 1358 David II granted the hereditary sheriffdom of Cromarty, which had been resigned by the earl, to Sir Adam Urquhart.¹⁸³ On 28 February 1359 David II granted the entire barony of Urquhart and castle, previously granted to the earls of Ross by Robert I, to the earl of Sutherland and his son, the king's nephew and prospective future king.¹⁸⁴ The exchequer recorded that in 1358 and 1359 Earl William was accused of blocking intromission of crown funds, and that the earl illegally collected the revenues of Caithness, lands of his niece, Isabella of Strathearn, William Sinclair's wife.¹⁸⁵ Michael Penman suggests that these events, and the removal of Earl William from the office of justiciar north of the Forth in November 1358, were complemented by the efforts of David II to persuade Sinclair to renounce Ross loyalties.¹⁸⁶

Although the earl of Ross had been stripped of his justiciarship and embarrassed by royal wrath, he continued to be powerful and seems to have increased his authority in other spheres of influence. On 28 June 1364 David II inspected a charter given by Earl William to John Tarrell; in addition to his title of earl of Ross, he was also titled the lord of Skye.¹⁸⁷ On 2 April 1368 Hugh exchanged the annual rents of the Rarichies to Marion Hermiston for all her lands and annual rents in the earldom of Ross.¹⁸⁸ Marion's husband, William seems to have died in this period, and on 31 August the widow granted to Hugh the lands of Balnagown, 'Achenyl' and 'Gorry', with the patronage of Balnagown chapel.¹⁸⁹

Hugh and William built a network of alliances with key kindreds within and bordering Ross. Perhaps the most vital of these was with the Munros of Foulis. On 17 November 1364 the king inspected and confirmed two charters made by the earl of Ross to Robert Munro. The lands granted in these charters were of Easter Foulis and Wester Logie, reiterating the ties between the comital line of the earls and the Munros.¹⁹⁰ According to one Munro source, Hugh of Philorth gave his daughter in marriage to George Munro, lord

¹⁸³ *R.R.S.*, vi, no. 202.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 208.

¹⁸⁵ *E.R.*, i, 543, 546, 558, 570.

¹⁸⁶ Penman, *David II*, 209-211. *R.R.S.*, vi, nos. 173, 198-203.

¹⁸⁷ *R.R.S.*, vi, no. 321.

¹⁸⁸ NRS GD 297/170.

¹⁸⁹ NRS GD 297/171.

¹⁹⁰ *R.R.S.*, vi, nos. 330, 331.

of Foulis, who later supposedly died with Hugh's father, Hugh, earl of Ross, at Halidon Hill.¹⁹¹ This union produced the next Foulis heir, Robert, whose loyalty was proven when he ostensibly was killed defending Earl William in 1369.¹⁹² Scholarship has differed on the specifics of this marriage: in his nineteenth-century publication on the Munros, Alexander MacKenzie claimed that the Ross lady who married this George Munro was the daughter of Earl Hugh, not Hugh of Philorth,¹⁹³ while twentieth-century historians suggest that Hugh's daughter, Jean, married George's son, Robert.¹⁹⁴ Despite the discrepancies surrounding it, this marriage indicates that the earl of Ross and Hugh of Philorth were strengthening their ties to prominent local lords.

Crucial to the interests of Earl William III and Hugh of Philorth was their relationship with Leod MacGillanders, who was instrumental in Ross expansion westward. The *Wardlaw MS* hints at Leod MacGillanders's position in the earldom; it describes him as the baron of Moniak, and states that MacGillanders had received his original lands from William Fenton, lord of Beaufort. The link between the lord of Beaufort and the baron of Moniak consequently placed MacGillanders in close contact with the Frasers of Lovat since William Fenton was supposedly closely tied to Alexander Fraser, 5th lord of Lovat¹⁹⁵ and later Alexander's brother, Hugh, sixth lord of Lovat, married Fenton's only daughter.¹⁹⁶ The thought that MacGillanders was based in Moniak and around the Beaully region is provoking since this area would have been associated more with the Aird than Ross. Leod MacGilleandrias may have been connected directly to Hugh of Philorth. The earl of Cromartie claims that Leod MacGilleandrias was the father of Paul MacTyre.¹⁹⁷ If we accept that there was a familial bond between Leod MacGilleandrias and Paul MacTyre, then Hugh of Philorth was strongly connected to MacGilleandrias via Paul to whom Hugh granted substantial lands in Strathoykel in 1365.¹⁹⁸ These kindreds based near the heartland of the earl of Ross's dominion were essential for William III and Hugh in establishing coherent lordship within the eastern portion of the earldom. Ties of these sorts permitted

¹⁹¹ *Munro Tree*, 3, J.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 3, K.

¹⁹³ MacKenzie, *History of the Munros of Fowlis*, 10.

¹⁹⁴ Ross, *The Great Clan Ross*, 80; Ross, *History of the Clan Ross*, 23.

¹⁹⁵ *Wardlaw*, 94.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹⁷ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 468.

¹⁹⁸ NRS GD 297/198; *Chron. Ross*, Appendix, no. ii, 38-41.

the brothers to extend their spheres of influence into neighbouring regions while having confidence in the stability of the earldom.

In 1366 the empire that Earl William and Hugh of Philorth had built was dealt a blow. By 13 September David II had arranged for his close adherent and crusader hero, Walter Leslie, to marry Earl William's daughter, Euphemia.¹⁹⁹ This marriage was seemingly rushed in an effort to catch the earl and the lord of Philorth off-guard, as papal dispensation was not granted until several months later.²⁰⁰ This was followed by years of royal intimidation. According to Earl William's complaint to the first parliament of Robert II in June 1371, a servant of Walter Leslie waylaid Earl William's courier, who was carrying letters to key magnates requesting their aid in protecting the Ross inheritance. Earl William went to Aberdeen to try and retain his lands, and granted to John Logie the use of the Plater forest lands in Forfarshire as a peace offering. But David II still showed aggression at dinner by subjecting the earl to hostile questions, whereupon Earl William and Hugh of Philorth fled. Queen Margaret ordered the arrest of the earl of Ross, a command countermanded by the king, but the king forfeited the earl of his earldom. Earl William met the king at Inverness to capitulate, resigning all his lands in Buchan to Walter Leslie, while Hugh of Philorth ran into hiding as a fugitive.²⁰¹ Penman has dated these events to c. 1367-1369.²⁰² If Penman is correct, then the Munro tradition of their leader dying in 1369 defending Earl William, may have been related to the royal actions against the earl.

By December 1369 Walter Leslie was calling himself the lord of Philorth, and with the collaboration of David II, was intimidating Earl William's ally, Adam of Urquhart, sheriff of Cromarty.²⁰³ In October 1370 Earl William was forced to resign the earldom of Ross and lordship of Skye and have them regranted with the entail that Euphemia and Walter Leslie, and their offspring would inherit, thereby destroying Hugh of Philorth's entail.²⁰⁴ Royal antagonism meant that Earl William and Hugh, former lord of Philorth, needed to strategically realign themselves. Indeed, opportunities to the west offered far more enticing benefits for the earldom of Ross than continuing to fight the king and Walter Leslie over

¹⁹⁹ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 258.

²⁰⁰ *C.P.L.*, iv, 59.

²⁰¹ NRS GD 297/193; *Chron. Ross*, Appendix, no. i, 33-38, 37; *A.B. Ill.*, ii, 387-389; *Familie of Innes*, 70-72.

²⁰² Penman, *David II*, 363-364.

²⁰³ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 300-301.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 354.

Buchan. During the 1360s William and Hugh acted upon their fears of David II's intentions. In an undated charter William granted to his brother Hugh all the lands of the earldom of Argyll,²⁰⁵ including the castle of Eilean Donan, in exchange for his lands in Buchan.²⁰⁶ While undated, this charter can reasonably be dated sometime after 31 August 1368 when Marion Hermiston, the widow of Hugh's squire, William Marshall, resigned her lands of Balnagown, 'Gorry', 'Achahany' and the annual rent of four marks of Tarbat to Hugh. In turn, Hugh was last recorded as lord of Philorth in an undated charter by Earl William confirming Hugh to these said lands.²⁰⁷ These two charters give the approximate date for when Hugh exchanged his lands in Buchan; Hugh was dead by February 1370,²⁰⁸ giving a window between August 1368 and February 1370 during which this exchange of territory could have taken place. This timeframe can perhaps be further narrowed by virtue of the Crown's declaration of Hugh being a fugitive, as it is probable that William III would have hesitated granting lands to an official outlaw, brother though he may have been.

This attempt to reposition Hugh of Philorth away from royal pressure displayed remarkable acumen. Such a strategy could have had several purposes: to allow Hugh to tactically retreat from an increasingly hostile position in Buchan; to protect the accumulated interests of Hugh's holdings in Buchan by placing them under the direct authority of Earl William; to reinforce Hugh's lands more closely associated with the earldom of Ross, giving Hugh greater leverage as potential inheritor in the event of William's death; to install a loyal and powerful adherent of William's in a region susceptible to friction; William and Hugh may have had plans to expand their territory westward, and positioning Hugh at Eilean Donan Castle was both strategically and symbolically crucial for such a push. Such a plan had the potential to develop a concrete lordship for Hugh in a region surrounded by the nominal allies of John of the Isles and the Steward.

William III gives an excellent illustration of the first two of these in his letter of complaint to Robert II for the treatment he and his brother received from David II; William stated that Hugh of Philorth had resigned his lands in Buchan to the earl because the earl could offer

²⁰⁵ What is meant by the Earldom of Argyll as no such earldom existed? Could this have been a clue as to William and Hugh's eventual goal for the latter's installation as the premiere magnate in the west in alliance with John MacDonald?

²⁰⁶ NRS GD 297/194.

²⁰⁷ NRS GD 297/171, NRS GD 297/172.

²⁰⁸ See below, 95.

better protection from Hugh's enemies.²⁰⁹ The last two reasons seem to have been realised as well, as Earl William and Hugh of Philorth seem to have developed a western theatre of expansion in an attempt to absorb north Argyll into a lordship dedicated to Hugh. Significantly, this western campaign consisted of outright military conquest, a stark contrast to Ross tactics seen in other regions. William Matheson suggests that when Earl William joined Bruce in 1308 he earned the enmity of the MacKenzies, who were Bruce's enemies. This resulted in the earl's conquest of the west sometime after Thomas Randolph hanged men in Eilean Donan in 1331, and links the lord of Foulis's death in 1369 to this violence.²¹⁰

Unfortunately, source material regarding how the earl of Ross took control of North Argyll, more specifically Kintail, is sparse. In fact, we must rely almost completely on biased seventeenth-century accounts to reconstruct the sequence of events. In the earl of Cromartie's account, we are told that MacKenzie of Kintail was ambushed by the earl of Ross and executed at Inverness during the time of David II's captivity, while MacKenzie's lands, except for Eilean Donan, were distributed by the earl.²¹¹ Another MacKenzie tradition adds that MacKenzie's lands were given to Leod MacGillandrais, whom the source calls 'the predecessor of Belnagawn'.²¹² Clearly, this source linked Leod MacGillanders with Balnagown, which was held by Hugh of Philorth. This association may stem from Hugh's grant of land to, and marital alliance with, Paul MacTyre, who may have been Leod's son. It is also possible that Sir Robert Gordon's assertion that all Rosses were of the family Gillanders²¹³ was an influential factor.

If there is truth to these traditions, it would seem that Leod MacGillanders was Earl William's lieutenant in Wester Ross and Argyll, who consolidated the region for the earl. MacGillanders seems to have enjoyed some measure of success and stability within Kintail, notwithstanding his eventual assassination by the MacKenzies.²¹⁴ Earl William's charter to Hugh of Philorth of Argyll and Eilean Donan indicates that the earl of Ross and

²⁰⁹ *Chron. Ross*, Appendix, no. i, 33-38; *Familie of Innes*, 70-72.

²¹⁰ Matheson, 'Traditions of the MacKenzies', 201-205, 209. Matheson argues that the *Munro Tree*'s account of the death of the Munro chief in 1369 was at the battle of Bealach nam Brog. However, the *Munro Tree* states that this battle occurred in 1452; see below, 181. It is probable that Bealach nam Brog was a conflation of several different battles.

²¹¹ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 466.

²¹² *H.P.*, ii, 8-9.

²¹³ Gordon, *Sutherland*, 36.

²¹⁴ *H.P.*, ii, 12.

Leod MacGillanders controlled Kintail and northern Argyll, which included the important castle of Eilean Donan amongst the spoils of the campaign. This charter confirms that the earl of Ross was actively acquiring lordship in Kintail and other parts of Argyll, but undermines the MacKenzie traditions in demonstrating that Eilean Donan fell to the control of Ross during this time; the campaign to control Kintail was far more comprehensive than the MacKenzie traditions are willing to admit.

Whether or not Hugh of Philorth participated in his brother's campaign to subdue Kintail is not known, but the death of Leod MacGillanders left a vacuum that was filled by Hugh. Considering David II's increasing hostility towards Ross after his return in 1357, Earl William and Hugh may have had a long-existing plan to increase Hugh's influence in the west. Indeed, Penman suggests that the earl of Ross and the Steward had quarrels which arose from William's takeover of the position of justiciar north of the Forth in 1339, and that Earl William had multiple confrontations with the Steward before David II returned, the control of Kintyre and the fate of the earldom of Strathearn being the most significant.²¹⁵ Therefore, Hugh of Philorth's involvement in Kintail and Argyll would seem likely, and not solely due to the death of MacGillanders.

Unfortunately, whatever could have developed from this stratagem was made moot by the declaration of Hugh's fugitive status. It is curious that Hugh was declared an outlaw when he and his brother fled in the aftermath of their encounter with the queen. It is conceivable that David II's plan to install Walter Leslie in the north was only feasible if Hugh of Philorth was publicly disgraced, and his legitimacy to inherit the earldom was put in doubt due to his outcast status. If Hugh was as influential as has been argued in this chapter, then it would have been vital to remove such a man who could rally MacTaggart support into action. Hugh of Philorth was lord over huge swaths of territory within Ross, Buchan, and apparently Argyll, but as a fugitive of the crown his ability to function politically was severely damaged, and his right to hold on to these lands were put into question. It was a calculated strategy to sidestep the heirless Earl William, and focus royal pressure on the more vibrant, and fertile, Hugh of Philorth.

Hugh's fugitive status does not seem to have lasted long; on 26 February 1370 David II granted Hugh Ross lands in the sheriffdom of Banff.²¹⁶ However, it was clear that Walter

²¹⁵ Penman, *David II*, 69.

²¹⁶ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 298.

Leslie continued to accumulate lands that would have kept Hugh contained; the next day a string of charters granted lands to Leslie, including the thanage of Aberchirder in the sheriffdom of Banff.²¹⁷ Any threat Hugh still posed to David II and Walter Leslie was ended in c.1370-1371 when Hugh of Philorth died; in a charter dated 14 February 1370 Earl William granted to William Ross, son of the deceased Hugh of Philorth, lands formerly held by William Dingwall.²¹⁸ Hugh of Philorth's death was soon followed by the death of the king who had destroyed him; David II died on 22 February 1371.²¹⁹ Earl William tried to use this reprieve to regain his position through his June 1371 letter to the new king, Earl William's brother-in-law, the Steward, now known as Robert II. However, nothing seems to have been done to revive the earl's male entail which would have reinstated Hugh of Philorth's son, William, as Earl William's heir. With Robert II unwilling to aid his brother-in-law, the earl could not undo the irreparable damage to his dynastic lineage. On 9 February 1372 William III, earl of Ross died,²²⁰ and with the deaths of Earl William and Hugh of Philorth, the MacTaggart comital dynasty ended.

Conclusion

The removal of John Balliol as king of Scotland, the imprisonment of the earl of Ross, and the establishment of an English administration in Scotland in the 1290s ushered in a period that came close to destroying the influence that the MacTaggart earls of Ross had built in the north since 1215, which had culminated in the creation of the sheriffdom of Skye in 1293. Countess Euphemia and her son Hugh struggled to maintain the integrity of the earldom on two fronts while trying to obtain the release of the earl. The anti-English rebellion of Andrew Murray found support in the Aird, Easter Ross, and the Black Isle: areas associated with Ross lordship. The countess tried to contain this threat while attempting to calm English suspicions of her own loyalty, but contemporary correspondence revealed the helplessness of the countess in controlling dissident elements in these regions.

As the countess raised an army to confront Andrew Murray, the sheriffdom of Skye that had been granted to her husband was pulled apart by the MacRuairis. Contrary to G.W.S.

²¹⁷ Ibid., nos. 338-339; Penman, *David II*, 400.

²¹⁸ NRS GD 297/176. This charter is dated 14 February 1369/70. If accurate, Hugh was dead for twelve days when the king granted him lands in Banffshire. Alternatively, Michael Penman auto-adjusts this charter's date to 14 February 1371, see Penman, *David II*, 408.

²¹⁹ *Scotichronicon*, vii, 360-361.

²²⁰ *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 25.

Barrow's bandit description, Lachlan and Ruari MacRuari demonstrated their capabilities as regional lords well versed in sophisticated preparations and had a coherent string of objectives. Their campaign against the islands of Skye and Lewis were perfectly coordinated to take advantage of the absent earl of Ross and the chaos in the earldom brought about by the actions of Andrew Murray. Additionally, Lachlan MacRuari's Comyn/MacDougall alliance encircling the earldom of Ross was shrewd in conception, potentially compounding the countess's woes. Long-term occupation of Skye and Lewis may have been a possible MacRuari aim, and the reaction of Alexander MacDonald might hint at similar ambitions: using the absence of the earl of Ross to expand influence on Skye and Lewis. Alexander's request that letters be sent to the nobles of Argyll and Ross to aid him suggests that he also saw this period as an opportunity to extend MacDonald influence into Ross.

The release of William II, earl of Ross, in 1304 did not end the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the earldom and the comital line; the earl faced formidable enemies as he struggled to re-establish Ross dominance in the north, the most prominent of whom was Robert Bruce. Nevertheless, the earl was able to survive, and even to expand his influence. This process of rejuvenation was fuelled by the ability of the earl and his sons to cultivate English patronage; this patronage was dependent on the mutually beneficial goal of securing the stability of northern Scotland. Through this common objective the earl was able to obtain guardianship over Caithness and Sutherland, and begin territorial expansion into the lordships in the Black Isle and the Aird. English support also allowed Earl William to re-establish in some form Balliol's creation of the sheriffdom of Skye, though whether this was functionally successful is questionable. The relationship with the English crown was strong enough that Earl William was willing to give up Bruce's family and supporters to the English. However, when Robert Bruce began his march up the Great Glen the earl of Ross was unwilling to risk his earldom. The earl's truce during 1307-1308 while Bruce ravaged neighbouring regions seems to have been a calculated inaction to ruin Comyn power in a region within which the earl of Ross wanted to expand further.

The severing of Ross's link with the English crown as a result of Robert Bruce's northern campaign did little harm. Instead, Earl William's submission to Robert Bruce in 1308 marked the end of a period of uncertainty and strife for the earldom of Ross, and it entered a period of great prosperity and royal patronage that was to last until 1357. The relationship that the king had with Earl Hugh was underlined by a series of generous grants which confirmed the earls of Ross as second only to Thomas Randolph in the north of

Scotland. Through Robert I the earls of Ross were able to secure title to lordship in Skye, and the more specific lordship of Trotternish. To the south and east the king established Hugh Ross throughout the Black Isle via the grants of the sheriffdom and burgh of Cromarty. This was complemented by the gains Earls William and Hugh made in the baronies of Redcastle, Tarradale and Avoch. It was also during this period that Buchan was drawn into the sphere of the earls of Ross via the marriage of Earl William's son, John, to the daughter of the Comyn earl of Buchan. The incorporation of Buchan into the patrimony of the earls of Ross would reshape the politics of the comital family, and a discernable shift of priorities eastward would define the lordship of Earl Hugh's successor, William III, while further placing the earls of Ross into closer proximity to royal politics. Indeed, the friendship formed by Robert Bruce and Earl Hugh directly complicated the next generation of Ross/crown relationships.

William III, earl of Ross, and his half-brother Hugh of Philorth built upon the tangible rewards their father's relationship with Robert I had produced to further expand the power of the earldom. The English captivity of David II from 1346 to 1357 and the removal of Randolph power in Moray enabled the brothers to reign supreme in the north. Under their leadership the earldom reached the pinnacle of its power: a hegemony, enhanced by the jurisdictional authority derived from the office of the justiciarship north of the Forth, that encompassed Buchan, Caithness, the Black Isle, the Aird, north Argyll and Ross. In addition, the earl and his brother were far more involved than previous generations in the politics of the Scottish court, with Hugh of Philorth being a major diplomatic figure in the negotiations for the release of David II.

The return of David II in 1357 was a decisive point in the history of the earldom; it was a target of a royal authority that wanted to place the earldom under tighter control, rather than to build a relationship with the existing comital leadership to maintain stability in the north. Hugh's effective disinheritance from the earldom at the hands of David II and the subsequent apathy of Robert II probably acted as a catalyst for those who represented the old regime in Ross to focus on Wester Ross and North Argyll, accompanied by an increase in dialogue with the lordship of the Isles. While there is no evidence that the MacDonalds were in direct communication with Hugh of Philorth or Earl William III, circumstances strongly indicate a renewal of political links between the Isles and Ross. Alexander Grant advocates the theory that from 1366 onwards the earl of Ross and Hugh of Philorth had

aligned themselves closer to the lordship of the Isles and the MacDonalds.²²¹ This has been supported by Karen Hunt.²²² Perhaps the legacy of both Earl William III and Hugh of Philorth and their struggle with David II was the beginnings of Ross dissatisfaction with royal authority. William's complaints to his brother-in-law regarding the earldom's future went largely unheeded. Indeed, the seeds of frustration with Stewart justice in Ross may well have been planted in 1371, making the earldom susceptible to the advances of the MacDonalds. The earldom of Ross would no longer be a source of support for royal policy or authority.

²²¹ Grant, 'Celtic Fringe', 127.

²²² Hunt, 'Albany', 215-216.

Chapter II: Interim Lordships: 1372-1423

The death of William III ended the MacTaggart dynasty as earls of Ross and introduced an interim period in which various factions struggled to gain supremacy over the earldom. The function of this chapter is to bridge the gap between the MacTaggart dynasty and the later MacDonald dynasty and seek to explain the reasons why the local powers in Ross might have welcomed the lords of the Isles rather than embracing Stewart authority. There is a relative dearth of source material specific to Ross during these years, perhaps a result of a lack of regular lordship within the earldom itself. Because of this, the chapter relies heavily on more general contemporary documents that are then filtered through a Ross-centric lens. This necessitates the use of modern scholarship that has extensively explored the reigns of the early Stewart kings and the Albany Stewarts, the powers that dominated Scotland during this period: for the former, the comprehensive works of Stephen Boardman, and for the latter, the excellent thesis of Karen Hunt. This chapter follows a chronological approach, beginning with the introduction of Leslie lordship in Ross and the Stewart involvement in the earldom. This is followed by a study of support for Donald, lord of the Isles, prior to, and during, the Harlaw campaign.

Walter Leslie and Stewarts

The rejection of Earl William's complaints by his brother-in-law, Robert II, and the subsequent death of the earl in 1372 were the final blows to the male entail that Earl William, Hugh of Philorth and the countess of Orkney had conceived to keep the earldom within the MacTaggart dynasty. Walter Leslie's position in Ross, a legacy of David II, was not challenged by Robert II because of the political realities facing the first Stewart monarch. The failure of Robert II to support Earl William, presumably notwithstanding some pressure from Queen Euphemia, the king's wife and earl's sister, seems to have stemmed from two factors: the need for Robert II to reach any accommodation with the Leslie/Lindsay affinity in maintaining peace north of the Forth, and the desire to project Stewart power in the north through his younger sons, Alexander, David and Walter.

Stephen Boardman has convincingly shown the political weakness of Robert II upon ascending to the throne because he was opposed by the powerful affinities of Douglas south of the Forth and of Leslie/Lindsay north of the Forth, reinforced by other powerful

favourites of David II.¹ Robert II took a pragmatic approach by making the earl of Douglas the justiciar south of the Forth and Sir James Lindsay justiciar north of the Forth.² Robert II's need to develop a working relationship with the Leslie/Lindsay bloc meant he could not afford to support his brother-in-law's efforts to restore the male entail to the Ross inheritance. It was more important for Robert II to placate the Lindsays and their kinsman, Walter Leslie. Efforts to conciliate the Leslie/Lindsay affinity were complemented by the attempts of the king to form a better relationship with the Lindsays, which resulted in the marriage of the king's niece, Marjory, to Alexander Lindsay, lord of Glen Esk, in 1371, and the marriage of Alexander Lindsay's son and heir, David, to the king's daughter, Elizabeth, in 1375.³ Moreover, Boardman has convincingly suggested that the ideals of chivalry and crusading, which were an integral part of the reputations of the Leslie and Lindsay lords, were important to John Stewart, earl of Carrick from the 1360s onwards. When Carrick became Robert III in 1390 his reign saw a strong focus on romantic and ceremonial chivalric values, and the Leslie/Lindsay bloc which espoused them, as a mechanism to foster good relations with the court of the English king, Richard II. This trend continued through the chivalric tendencies of Robert III's heir, David, duke of Rothesay.⁴ Therefore, if Boardman's ideas are accepted, Walter Leslie was the preferred choice for holding lordship over the earldom of Ross rather than a reversion to Earl William's tailzie to Hugh of Philorth for reasons more complex than that of political necessity, although that still may have been the primary motivation behind the ever practical Robert II's decision.

Walter Leslie's tenure as lord of Ross has been described as a period of absentee lordship because of his preoccupation with crusading and southern politics.⁵ It seems that throughout the 1370s Walter Leslie appears to have been granting out extended Ross patrimony, usually to his Lindsay relatives. On 20 August 1373 Robert II granted New Forest in Galloway to James Lindsay; Walter Leslie had resigned this into the hands of the king.⁶ On 3 October 1375 the king granted the land of Aberchirder in the sheriffdom of

¹ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 45-48.

² *E.R.*, ii, 394 435, 458.

³ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 47-48; Stephen Boardman, 'Robert III (1390-1406)' in *Scottish Kingship, 1306-1542: Essays in Honour of Norman Macdougall*, ed. Michael Brown and Roland Tanner (Edinburgh, 2008), 109-125, 112.

⁴ Boardman, 'Robert III (1390-1406)', 111-115, 119-121.

⁵ Steve Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East: The Badenoch Stewarts I. Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchan, Lord of Badenoch', *Northern Scotland*, 16 (1996), 1-30, 11.

⁶ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 446.

Banff to William Lindsay after the lord of Ross had resigned it.⁷ Finally, on 25 December 1379 Robert II granted lands in the sheriffdom of Kincardine to a Patrick of Inverpeffer which had been resigned by Walter Leslie and Countess Euphemia.⁸ Perhaps these grants were structured as to allow Leslie to pursue a more southward-looking agenda and his passion for crusading. These resignations on the part of Walter Leslie may have been unwelcome to those who had served Earl William when the earldom of Ross had reached the zenith of its territorial boundaries.

One feature of Walter Leslie's lordship in Ross was the increased role the king's sons played in the earldom and the rest of northern Scotland. Stewart expansion in the late fourteenth century focused on the dominion carved out by Alexander Stewart, lord of Badenoch. The lord of Badenoch's recorded links to Ross began in the 1370s: he was involved in tax collection in the earldom,⁹ and he had a relationship with a local woman, Mary, daughter of 'Eachainn'.¹⁰ Boardman has noted that this latter attachment was an attempt to gain a foothold with some of the local powers in the earldom, and that the lord of Badenoch probably already had children by this lady in the 1370s, placing his cultivation of a Ross kindred well within the years of the lordship of Walter Leslie.¹¹ If the lord of Badenoch was extending his reach in the earldom it could have been at the expense of the lord of Ross. Yet it might be suggested that those nobles who supported their countess, despite being adversarial to her Leslie husband, were unlikely to have welcomed Alexander Stewart's intrusion into the affairs of the earldom if for no other reason than that his father, Robert II, had dismissed Earl William's entreaties to restore the MacTaggart legacy through Hugh of Philorth's male line. Therefore those clans known as supporters of Earl William and his daughter can likely be excluded from the list of those in Ross whom Alexander Stewart was courting.

While Alexander Stewart's career as a Highland magnate has received a fair amount of attention from historians, and rightly so, there was another individual who posed a great threat to the lord of Badenoch's growing influence, and who might have been seen as a potential alternative by both the king and the local Ross clans to exercise lordship in the earldom. This was David Stewart, the king's first son by Euphemia Ross, the king's second

⁷ *Ibid.*, nos. 621, 715.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 680.

⁹ *E.R.*, iii, 14, 44-45.

¹⁰ *Moray Reg.*, 353-354.

¹¹ Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 9.

wife and sister to the late William III, earl of Ross. Robert II had high ambitions for his fourth surviving son, who was made earl of Strathearn by 1371.¹² This was complemented by the grant of the barony of Urquhart in the same year,¹³ although Urquhart Castle was leased to the older Alexander Stewart arguably because of David's youthful age.¹⁴

While in the 1370s Robert II was careful not to antagonise the Leslie, Lindsays and Douglasses in order to maintain peace in the realm, he and his sons were far more aggressive in other northern lordships no longer controlled by a strong earl of Ross. Walter Leslie's limited form of lordship in Ross did not extend to the larger baronial organisation in the north which had formed under the aegis of William, earl of Ross, in the mid-fourteenth century. In particular, the king's eye turned towards the earldom of Caithness which was still a fractured unit of lordship, a legacy of the five daughters of Malise, earl of Strathearn. The earldom of Caithness had been under the control of the late earl of Ross since he was granted the guardianship of Elizabeth, the named heiress of Malise, and the Sinclairs and Airds had both benefited from Earl William's patronage, with both families claiming one of Malise of Strathearn's five daughters in marriage.

The Aird family had had a long record of service to the earls of Ross stemming at least as far back as the 1290s. Their efforts to control and expand upon their portion of Caithness were hindered by the loss of their patron, Earl William, without whom they were vulnerable to Stewart expansion. By 1375 Earl William's legacy in Caithness was being disassembled when on 21 March Robert II granted to his son, David, earl of Strathearn, the lands resigned by Alexander of the Aird.¹⁵ Crawford suggests that Robert II was the prime mover in securing Alexander of the Aird's resignation of the rights to the earldom of

¹² *RPS*, A1371/2. Date accessed: 15 October 2014; *R.M.S.*, i, nos. 406, 526, 538.

¹³ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 537. It is interesting to note the importance of sons from second marriages to further family interests at the expense of progeny from previous unions. This was demonstrated when determining that the lordship of the Isles would be inherited by Donald, John MacDonald's son by his second wife, Margaret Stewart, at the expense of Ranald and Godfraidh, sons of Amy MacRuari. See Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, Appendix ii, 204-205. The relationship between Alexander Stewart, lord of Badenoch, and David Stewart falls in to a similar category with regards to control of northern Scotland and should be evaluated in like fashion. Because of his mother, David Stewart probably was perceived as a more valuable asset to Stewart long-term control of the north despite Alexander Stewart's seniority. Robert II may have envisioned Alexander Stewart playing the same role to David Stewart that Ranald MacDonald played for Donald, lord of the Isles, that of guardian of his younger half-brother's interests. The situation of the barony of Urquhart is evidence of this initial relationship.

¹⁴ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 76.

¹⁵ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 614.

Caithness in order to prevent further destabilization of the north.¹⁶ This thought should be taken further; just as the Sinclairs were considered to be working in the interests of the earl of Ross, the Aird family were known as adherents to the earls of Ross throughout the fourteenth century, with family members acting as faithful messengers, diplomats and squires for the earls. Although Crawford identified the Ross/Sinclair connection in the efforts to control the Strathearn inheritance, this was not the full picture. Indeed, the evidence points to Earl William employing both Sinclairs and Aird nobles in his attempts to spread Ross influence into Sutherland and Caithness. Earl William was playing a more complex political game by hedging the potential gains to be made north of Ross through orchestrating marriages of not one but two of the Strathearn heiresses to his own subordinates.

Within this context, Alexander of the Aird's resignation of Caithness to the Scottish Crown in 1375 should be considered as more than a desire to stabilize the extreme north of the Scottish kingdom; it was an extension of the policies originally conceived by King David II to break the power of Clan Ross and its allies in Scotland north of the Beaully Firth with royal authority, which was continued as the early Stewart kings began to flex their political muscle. Earl William's rejected plea to his Stewart sovereign was an appeal to preserve his family's inheritance through his half-brother, Hugh of Philorth, and the broader network of Ross control that had expanded throughout the north of Scotland. This was followed by David gaining the title to the earldom of Caithness by 28 December 1377 when he was granted palatinate powers in his earldoms.¹⁷ The king had brought together the earldoms of Strathearn and Caithness under David Stewart's control, a feat echoing that of the long dead Earl Malise. Indeed, the significance of the Caithness/Strathearn union, the historical ties between those earldoms with the earls of Ross, and David Stewart's own blood ties to the MacTaggart dynasty all suggest that Robert II envisioned his son, David, becoming the pre-eminent power in the north of the realm with the assistance of the lord of Badenoch.

Further evidence that Robert II wanted the earl of Strathearn and the lord of Badenoch to have a working partnership was seen when David Stewart did not receive all of the Aird family inheritance in the north. On 9 February 1377 Robert II granted Alexander, lord of Badenoch, three davochs of land in the earldom of Sutherland known as 'Garthyys' which

¹⁶ Barbara E. Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms: Orkney and Caithness from AD 870 to 1470* (Edinburgh, 2013), 328-329.

¹⁷ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 666.

had been resigned by Alexander of the Aird.¹⁸ Perhaps the king thought to bolster David's position in the north through the authority of his elder brother, the king's lieutenant in the north. But it was clear by the 1380s when David Stewart reached adulthood, that he and the lord of Badenoch were competing for control of the north through their father and through securing the support of northern magnates. Boardman suggested that the patronage David Stewart received from his father was largely prompted by his mother.¹⁹ Since the queen was the sister-in-law of the late Malise, earl of Strathearn and Caithness, and given her brother, Earl William's, heavy involvement in the affairs of Malise, this does seem highly likely. Indeed, Boardman may have also shed some light into the reasons behind the grant to David Stewart of Urquhart when he identified Euphemia's connection to Urquhart and Badenoch, derived from the *terce* rights she enjoyed from her first marriage to the deceased John Randolph, earl of Moray.²⁰

With two earldoms, the barony of Urquhart, and a dedicated royal mother, David Stewart was a power to be reckoned with, a viable alternative in controlling the north compared to his older half-brother, Alexander Stewart, and the nominal lord of Ross, Walter Leslie. Through his royal parents, David Stewart had inherited the legacy of Malise of Strathearn, a legacy forged with the aid of William III, earl of Ross, the Sinclair and the Aird families. This was enhanced by David Stewart's own lineage that made him nephew to both Earl William III and Hugh of Philorth. This familial tie gave Strathearn leverage in the earldom of Ross that his elder brother, Alexander Stewart, could never have: a claim to the earldom of Ross through his mother as nephew to the last earl of Ross. The habitual absence of Walter Leslie may have prompted the nobles of Ross to turn to David Stewart for patronage. William Ross, younger brother of the lord of Balnagown, received the patronage of David, earl of Strathearn and Caithness, who granted to William lands in the earldom of Caithness, confirmed by Robert II on 28 December 1377.²¹ If his interactions with William Ross are any indication, David Stewart was shrewd enough to realise the advantages that a good relationship with his cousins in Ross held. In conjunction with his earldoms of Caithness and Strathearn, David Stewart's patronage to local leaders in Ross could effectively challenge the ability of both the Leslie/Lindsay affinity and the lord of Badenoch in controlling the north.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 601.

¹⁹ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 106, footnote 84.

²¹ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 666.

David Stewart may have extended patronage to the Munros as well. Munro tradition claims that the younger son of Robert Munro, Thomas, married the heiress of Duncrub while he was in the south hiding because he had killed the ‘governor’ of Dingwall castle appointed by the Duke of Albany.²² If this was the case the Munro discontent over the political situation in the earldom matched that of Clan Ross. This discontent was turning violent and posed a serious threat. Munro tradition also holds that Thomas Munro of Duncrub had a son named John, nicknamed Roach or Rollock/Rollo, who was confirmed in Duncrub by the earl of Strathearn on 13 February 1380.²³ There is evidence that Strathearn did have an adherent named John Rollo in the 1380s which matches neatly with the Munro tradition. On 14 February 1381 the king confirmed Strathearn’s grant to one John Rollo of his lands in the earldom of Strathearn.²⁴ The king’s confirmation of his son’s grants to Rollo underlies a larger Stewart support for this man. As noted by R.W. Munro, the man in the Munro tradition was probably the same man who served as secretary to Robert, earl of Fife in 1398 known as John Rollo or Rollok of Duncrub.²⁵ If this Munro tradition is accurate then the earl of Strathearn had drawn the Munros, or at least a segment of the clan, into his faction and established the Munros in the earldom of Strathearn, all of which was likely backed by Strathearn’s father and elder brother, Robert II and the earl of Fife. Strathearn’s patronage to the Munros would have implications beyond his own untimely demise, as this John Rollo remained an important asset after Strathearn’s death, becoming a member of Fife’s entourage in 1398. Indeed, by inheriting Strathearn’s adherents Fife could have indicated his intent to inherit his younger brother’s interest in Ross.

In his pursuit of gathering a following in Ross, Strathearn approached potential supporters in Clan Munro in a similar way to his efforts towards Clan Ross, becoming patron to the younger sons of both clans. Strathearn’s interactions with nobles in Ross must have given both Walter Leslie and Alexander Stewart much cause for apprehension. After all, Strathearn was drawing elements of the leading clans in Ross to him, elements that were probably opposed to Leslie lordship in Ross and who saw in David Stewart a strong claim to the earldom.

1380 saw Walter Leslie spend a fair amount of time in Ross acting as lord of the earldom. On 20 February he and his wife, Countess Euphemia, were in Dingwall acting as patrons to

²² *Munro Tree*, 3, K/1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3, K/2.

²⁴ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 634.

²⁵ *Munro Tree*, opposite 3, note for K/2.

clergy in Rosemarkie, and accompanied by the leaders of the Munros and the Dingwalls, Hugh Munro and William Dingwall.²⁶ In November, Walter Leslie was in Tain where he granted to Hugh Ross of Kinfauns the lands of Reay and Dunbeath in the earldom of Caithness, lands previously held by Andrew Barclay. This was witnessed by the majority of Ross notables, both secular and spiritual: the lords of Foulis and Balnagown, William Dingwall, dean of Ross, Adam Urquhart, Alexander Murray, Sir Robert Innes, Sir Richard Comyn, Sir John Sutherland, Nicholas Sutherland, Patrick, abbot of Fearn and Alexander, bishop of Ross.²⁷ Through these acts Walter Leslie was actively surrounding himself with the most important men in Ross. Perhaps Leslie was keenly aware of the fragile nature of his position in the north and was seeking to cultivate his wife's adherents in a bid to rebuff the designs of the Stewart brothers, Alexander, lord of Badenoch and David, earl of Strathearn and Caithness; by 1380 Leslie was trying to address this situation and secure his legacy. If so, the lord of Ross was using the opportunity given by the charters to cultivate patronage with the local leadership in Ross. What is of particular interest is Leslie's grant to Ross of Kinfauns as this man might have represented the remnants of the old Ross establishment in the east constructed a generation earlier, which had been completely undermined by Leslie's becoming lord of Philorth.²⁸ In fact, it is possible that Hugh of Kinfauns had the potential to become the focal point of resistance to the Leslie presence in

²⁶ *Munro Writs*, 4-5, nos. 12-13.

²⁷ NRS GD 297/229.

²⁸ The assumption that Kinfauns was part of the earldom of Ross's patrimony derives from an undated grant by Robert I to Hugh Ross, future fourth earl of Ross of the MacTaggart dynasty, of the lands of Kinfauns in exchange for lands Hugh's brother Walter had been granted by Edward Bruce; see *R.M.S.*, i, appendix i, no. 108. There is no contemporary recorded familial connection between the Rosses of Kinfauns and the earls of Ross. Skene incorrectly thought that the Kinfauns Rosses were the real descendants of Hugh of Philorth, and that the Balnagown Rosses had pretentiously assumed the name Ross while being the descendants of the MacTyre family; see William F. Skene, *The Highlanders of Scotland*, i (London, 1837), 229-232. However, the Rosses of Balnagown did descend from Hugh of Philorth as evidenced by fourteenth century charters. Nevertheless, Skene's theory regarding the Rosses of Kinfauns descent has intrigued many into hypothesizing about their ancestry. Descent from a younger son of Hugh of Philorth would make the Rosses of Kinfauns cousins to the Balnagown Rosses, with the former branch being junior to the latter since the Balnagown Rosses traced their founding from Hugh of Philorth and thereon through Hugh's firstborn son. The compulsion to make the Rosses of Kinfauns an extension of Clan Ross is understandable, particularly since documents concerning Ross of Kinfauns' ownership of Sutherland lands are to be found in the Balnagown Charters; see NRS GD 297/229. However, there is no evidence that Hugh of Philorth ever possessed Kinfauns. Therefore, any claim that the Rosses of Kinfauns shared a common descent with Clan Ross must be treated with caution. The fact that Kinfauns was a part of the patrimony of the earls of Ross since the kingship of Robert Bruce, provides an argument that the Rosses of Kinfauns were of the same kindred, though not necessarily stemming from Hugh of Philorth. At the very least the Rosses of Kinfauns were confirmed vassals of the earls of Ross from the early fourteenth century until Kinfauns was removed from the patrimony of the Ross earls and put into the hands of Walter Leslie.

the eastern portions of Ross patrimony. But if Leslie could pull Hugh of Kinfauns into his group of adherents then Leslie's lands in Buchan were more secure.

The limited amount of evidence available seems to indicate then that by 1380, in the last years of his life, Walter Leslie, perhaps guided by the countess, was noticeably more proactive in trying to gain support through patronage of the key magnates of the earldom of Ross and the larger Ross patrimony. This was probably in an effort to create a coalition of support for his son and heir, Alexander Leslie, an effort perhaps made easier by Alexander's status as the legitimate grandson of the last MacTaggart earl, emphasising the importance of Countess Euphemia's role in Ross. This behaviour was a marked change compared with Leslie's actions in the 1370s when he granted Ross lands to his Lindsay and Leslie relatives at the expense of the Ross patrimony. These attempts to build a network of loyal vassals for the Leslies in Ross could have been successful enough to limit the earl of Strathearn's own political efforts in Ross. Walter Leslie's diplomatic efforts in Ross may have extended to the Ross patrimony in Wester Ross and North Argyll; Matheson suggests that Walter Leslie may have tried to stabilise relations with the MacKenzie kindred, possibly granting them Kinellan.²⁹ Stewart pressures may have even convinced Walter Leslie to seek out the friendship of the lord of the Isles. Walter and Euphemia's daughter, Mary Leslie, married Donald, lord of the Isles.³⁰ Steer and Bannerman suggest that this marriage probably occurred prior to 1387 based on Countess Euphemia's 1366 marriage to Walter Leslie, and the fact that Donald was already an adult by 1387.³¹ If so, it is possible that this match was made by Walter Leslie before 1382 in an effort to secure his son's western flank.

By February 1382 Walter Leslie was dead, his tenuous hold on Ross revealingly ending outside the earldom at Perth.³² His death was compounded by the demise of Alexander Lindsay of Glen Esk in the same year;³³ the Leslie/Lindsay bloc had lost the men most able to maintain its status quo north of the Forth and in Ross. Sir Walter's legacy was the disintegration of the extensive Ross hegemony and patrimony, particularly in Buchan, as the earldom was drawn into the political orbit of, and pulled apart by, the Leslie/Lindsay bloc and the Stewarts. A consequence of the greatly reduced stature of the earldom could

²⁹ Matheson, 'Traditions of the MacKenzies', 211.

³⁰ *H.P.*, i, 28; *Reliquiae Celtiquae*, ii, 161; *A.L.I.*, Appendix B, B5.

³¹ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 149.

³² *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 27.

³³ *Scotichronicon*, vii, 388-389.

have been that those loyal to the MacTaggart lineage, disenfranchised by the actions of David II and Robert II, were drawn to those exhibiting stability and strength: the king's sons, Alexander and David, and the lord of the Isles.³⁴

Alexander Stewart

The death of Walter Leslie meant that the earldom was vulnerable yet again as young Alexander Leslie was a minor. This vulnerability was compounded by the weakened state of the earldom. Aside from Euphemia's in-laws, the Lindsays, the countess had few allies still powerful enough to counter the king or his sons. Predictably, the void of power in Ross was filled by the king's sons, whose northern lands served as platforms to extend into Ross.

Evidence of Strathearn trying to keep control of Ross out of the hands of the lord of Badenoch might be seen by March 1382, within a month of Walter Leslie's death, when Countess Euphemia was exercising her rights in the barony of Kingedward with her father's loyal followers, Adam, sheriff of Cromarty, and Hugh, lord of Foulis at her side. Additionally, allies of the deceased Walter Leslie and the lord of Badenoch's enemies featured in Euphemia's charters such as Alexander Bur, bishop of Moray, and Sir Walter Stewart of Railston.³⁵ Railston was the cousin and vassal of Strathearn, was Alexander Lindsay's brother-in-law, and an ally of Walter Leslie.³⁶ The presence of Railston and the bishop of Moray at the court of the countess was therefore further evidence of Strathearn's interests in Ross, and might indicate that David Stewart was attempting to pre-empt his elder half-brother to control the earldom with the assistance of the bishop of Moray and Leslie/Lindsay adherents. Yet, ultimately the efforts of these men ended in failure and the next month saw Countess Euphemia in the company of Alexander Stewart, the lord of Badenoch. On 30 April, 'in her pure and simple widowhood', the countess granted to Hugh Munro, 'her dearest cousin', the davoch of 'Contulich' and the castle of 'Ardach', witnessed by William Dingwall, dean of Ross, and the lord of Badenoch.³⁷ The lord of

³⁴ If Hugh of Philorth had started a political dialogue with the MacDonalds, it is probable this continued under Hugh's son, William, as the earldom endured a period of weakness.

³⁵ A.B.III., ii, 389-390; Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 77.

³⁶ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 77, 89.

³⁷ *Munro Writs*, no. 11, 4. This document is actually dated 30 April 1379, but because Countess Euphemia is described as being a widow Boardman has argued that it is misdated, with the correct date likely to have been 1382, after Walter Leslie was dead. See Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 77, 101, footnote no. 37. Therefore, Boardman accepts the record of Sir Walter's death in 1382 given by the *Calendar of Fearn*. Additionally, we have already seen that Walter

Badenoch's appearance with the countess, Hugh Munro and William Dingwall might indicate that at least some of the important magnates in Ross were being persuaded to place themselves in Alexander Stewart's camp.

Alexander Stewart's presence in Ross has been interpreted as a sign of his pre-eminence in the earldom, a pre-designed plan that had royal approval.³⁸ However, it could have been an act of desperation. The speed with which Alexander moved to associate himself with the countess could suggest he was worried about his half-brothers - particularly the earl of Strathearn and Caithness who was Alexander's superior in comital title at least - and who could also have used the young age of Alexander Leslie to establish his own control over the earldom. Strathearn's possession of Caithness, his matrilineal ties, and putative network of patronage with the Rosses and Munros were potent reminders to the lord of Badenoch that his younger half-brother was in a strong position to influence events in Ross.

Alexander's Stewart's presence at the court of Countess Euphemia in April was followed quickly by their marriage, and a restructuring of the Ross inheritance favouring him and any future heirs he and Euphemia might have. Robert II was in Inverness in July 1382 where he granted four charters to his son, Alexander Stewart, the new earl of Buchan and his new wife Countess Euphemia, after she had resigned her possessions to the king. The first charter, given on 22 July, dealt exclusively with the barony of Kingedward, in the sheriffdom of Aberdeen, and made clear that any progeny born of this new union would inherit the barony before Euphemia's first-born son, Alexander Leslie.³⁹ The second charter (24 July) followed the same formula as the first and granted the thanage and castle of Dingwall to the couple. Again, the charter specified any future offspring of the earl of Buchan and the countess of Ross would inherit before any others.⁴⁰ The third charter (25 July) was more comprehensive and addressed the lordships and baronies associated with the patrimony of the earldom of Ross: the lordships of Skye and Lewis, all the lands in Caithness and Sutherland attached to the earldom of Ross, those lands within the sheriffdoms of Inverness and Nairn, the barony of Fitkill in the sheriffdom of Fife, Forgandenny, Kinfauns and some Athol lands in the sheriffdom of Perth, the thanage of

Leslie appears in documents dated 1380. The incorrect date may unwittingly reflect the level of Stewart interference in Ross politics prior to the death of Sir Walter.

³⁸ Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 11-13.

³⁹ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 737; For English translation see *Invernessiana*, 82-83.

⁴⁰ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 741; *Invernessiana*, 83.

Glendowachy and the lands of Deskford in the sheriffdom of Banff and lands in Galloway.⁴¹ The fourth and final charter (25 July) dealt with the earldom of Ross itself and confirmed Euphemia's resignation of the earldom into the hands of Alexander Stewart. This grant was different from the others in that it only granted him the earldom of Ross in liferent, without a clause stipulating that Alexander's heirs through Euphemia would inherit.⁴² The earldom would still be inherited by Alexander Leslie, but it was an earldom potentially stripped of all the accumulated territory which had been achieved through five generations of Ross earls, if Countess Euphemia's second marriage proved fruitful. It is interesting that Dingwall and Kingedward were granted as individual charters. Dingwall's importance in controlling Ross was self-evident, and the earl of Buchan needed a centre of power in the earldom to press his influence there. Kingedward was a far more personal matter; as noted by Boardman, the grant of Kingedward was vital for Alexander's control of the earldom of Buchan, and was the immediate prelude to Alexander Stewart assuming the title earl of Buchan.⁴³

While David II in the 1360s had prevented the survival of the MacTaggart dynasty through his removal of the male entail set up by Earl William III and Hugh of Philorth, Robert II's charters in 1382 had the potential to destroy their territorial legacy by removing all of the outlying lordships associated with the earldom from the next earl of Ross's inheritance. Even Dingwall, the caput of the earldom, would be removed from Alexander Leslie's hands in the event that Countess Euphemia produced more children. Robert II's division of the earldom of Ross and separation from its extended territories ran the risk of destabilising the cohesion of the earldom, and could have earned the ire of Alexander Leslie and those in Ross who benefited from its large patrimony.

Alexander Stewart's gain of Ross was not without complications. His half-brothers, the sons of Queen Euphemia, David and Walter, along with their mutual brother-in-law Sir John Lyon, were eager to make their own gains, some of them at the expense of Alexander Stewart. These were all men who had better relations with Alexander's older brothers, Carrick and Fife, than he did and, in the case of David and Walter, had their own claims to Ross lands through their mother. While Euphemia's earldom was the target of Alexander Stewart, others were pulling apart the countess's eastern inheritance. On 24 April 1382 Robert II granted to his second son by Queen Euphemia, Walter, the western portion of the

⁴¹ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 742; *Invernessiana*, 83.

⁴² *R.M.S.*, i, no. 736; *Invernessiana*, 83.

⁴³ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 77.

lands of Kinfauns in the sheriffdom of Perth which had been resigned by Countess Euphemia.⁴⁴ This half of Kinfauns had been granted by Robert I to Euphemia's grandfather, Hugh, in exchange for lands previously given to Hugh's brother Walter by Edward Bruce.⁴⁵ Its detachment from Euphemia's patrimony was a blow similar to that of the loss of Philorth under Walter Leslie's aegis and it meant Euphemia's kinsman Robert Ross of Kinfauns was no longer vassal to the countess. Walter Stewart was a cousin to the countess yet this was hardly of any relief as Robert of Kinfauns was to suffer at the hands of Robert II when, in a manner similar to the countess's treatment, Robert Ross resigned his lands of 'Kyldinechane' in the sheriffdom of Fife into the king's hands, which were then granted to the king's son-in-law John Lyon, thane of Glamis, on 4 April 1382.⁴⁶ This land had only six years previously been granted to Robert Ross on 9 March 1376.⁴⁷ If the Rosses of Kinfauns had joined the cause of Walter Leslie by 1380, as seems likely given the Sutherland land grant to Hugh of Kinfauns in that year, then the reduction of their lands and the removal of Kinfauns from Countess Euphemia's possession in 1382 seems to have been a consequence of aligning with Walter Leslie rather than with the king's sons by Queen Euphemia, or perhaps an excuse to further disassemble the patrimony of the earldom of Ross to compensate Walter Stewart after the king granted the earldom to Alexander Stewart.

Both Lyon and Walter Stewart were chipping away at the Ross hegemony prior to Buchan receiving his reward from his father. These gains by Lyon were suddenly halted when Sir James Lindsay, lord of Crawford, murdered John Lyon on 4 November 1382.⁴⁸ Boardman has suggested that the assassination of Lyon was a response by the Leslie/Lindsay axis to Robert II's parcelling out of the north among his sons, Lyon's betrayal of his earlier Lindsay loyalties and the growing friction between the earl of Carrick with his brothers Fife and Strathearn.⁴⁹ For both Countess Euphemia and her kinsman Robert Ross of Kinfauns, John Lyon's downfall must have been well received yet inevitably mattered little as the king's sons pressed inexorably; Euphemia's fate had been sealed four months previously with her attachment to Alexander Stewart, earl of Buchan, while Robert Ross of

⁴⁴ *R.M.S.*, i, no. 743.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Appendix i, no. 108.

⁴⁶ *R.M.S.*, i, nos. 693, 781.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 573.

⁴⁸ *Scotichronicon*, vii, 388-389; *E.R.*, iii, 657.

⁴⁹ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 79-81.

Kinfauns had been subordinated to Walter Stewart when Kinfauns was detached from Euphemia's holdings.

It is unclear how the important men in Ross felt about the countess's second marriage. Those who supported the rights of the young Alexander Leslie were probably wary of Alexander Stewart and the conditions of the marriage. Boardman suggests a mixed reception: the match being a logical choice with the potential to extend greater protection to the earldom by the king's lieutenant in the north, and probably welcomed by Countess Euphemia, but with the caveat that those who were closely linked to the fortunes of the young Alexander Leslie may have been opposed to the king's son.⁵⁰ If local magnates in Ross did oppose Alexander Stewart, it did not prevent him from trying to perform administrative duties, perhaps using such occasions to offer patronage. On 9 May 1384 Alexander Stewart, earl of Buchan, granted sasine of 'Hospostyl' and 'Innverkascolayne' to William Ross, lord of Balnagown.⁵¹ This lord was the key to controlling north-east Ross and, as the inheritor of Hugh of Philorth's legacy, was a potential source of opposition for Buchan as he had been for the deceased Walter Leslie.

Unfortunately, there is little more contemporary information from which to construct how the lord of Balnagown reacted to Buchan's lordship of Ross or Buchan's lieutenantship of the north. The lord of Balnagown may have been pre-occupied during the late 1380s and early 1390s in events to the west. During this period, the *Sleat History* recounts how Donald, lord of the Isles, was quarrelling with his brother, John Mor, over inheritance, and had called up his vassals and allies to force John's submission; the first of these allies listed by the *Sleat History* were the men of Ross.⁵² Perhaps William Ross, lord of Balnagown, joined the lord of the Isles in this feud. It is probable Ross of Balnagown had increased his dialogue with Hebridean lords, as Leslie and Stewart powers alienated the important men of Ross. Men from Ross may not have been the only source for the lord of the Isle's recruitment; manpower from Glenmoriston and Urquhart may have also enlisted as well.⁵³

What does seem certain is that those who had benefited from the Leslie lordship of the previous decade did not do well under Buchan's lordship. Signs of this were seen in 1387

⁵⁰ Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 12-13.

⁵¹ NRS GD 297/177.

⁵² *H.P.*, i, 32-33; For more on this feud see Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 162-163; Richard Oram, 'The Lordship of the Isles: 1336-1545' in ed. Donald Omand, *The Argyll Book* (Edinburgh, 2004), 123-139, 130.

⁵³ Mackay, *Urquhart and Glenmoriston*, 49.

when on 30 December Hugh Ross of Kinfauns, titled as 'lord of half of Kinfauns', resigned his lands in Caithness to the earl of Moray, John Dunbar.⁵⁴ This latest resignation of land compounded Hugh's earlier losses to Walter Stewart and John Lyon. That Hugh of Kinfauns had resigned the lands he had received from Walter Leslie as lord of Ross to the earl of Moray might indicate that Hugh was incapable of protecting his lands in the north and sought a solution. Moray was no friend to Buchan and his acceptance of these Caithness lands which were a part of the Ross patrimony was a direct snub to Buchan's authority over Ross. Indeed, this might have been part of the larger campaign by Buchan's brothers to reduce his influence, especially considering Hugh of Kinfauns was vassal to Walter Stewart. If Buchan's hold over Ross could be challenged by the actions of men like Hugh of Kinfauns, it was shaky indeed.

Although Buchan might have had difficulties asserting his authority over Ross, his position in the north seemed secure for much of the 1380s. As Boardman has argued, Buchan strengthened his hold over Bona in the Great Glen at the expense of the earl of Moray and the Chisholms in 1386, he was made justiciar north of the Forth by 1387, and his chief competitor for influence in the north, David Stewart, earl of Strathearn and Caithness, died unexpectedly between the years 1385 to 1390, with his daughter described as countess of Strathearn by 1390. This was complemented by a fairly laissez faire royal government headed by the earl of Carrick as guardian for the aged Robert II from 1384 until 1388, which Boardman has described as a major disappointment for the opponents of the earl of Buchan, particularly for the Leslie/Lindsay faction, because Carrick was reluctant to rein in his younger brother at the expense of increased friction in the north.⁵⁵

These reprieves were fleeting and the focus of Fife's guardianship agenda in December 1388 was to reduce the power of his brother, the earl of Buchan.⁵⁶ Fife's assault on Buchan's hegemony fitted in well with Euphemia's actions to detach herself from her Stewart marriage and begin to assert the rights of her son, Alexander Leslie. Therefore Fife's guardianship was probably supported by Countess Euphemia and her adherents. In autumn 1389, overseen by the bishops of Moray and Ross, Countess Euphemia and Buchan came to an agreement after the countess complained that her husband was unfaithful and not fulfilling his obligations as her spouse or as lord of Ross. In response,

⁵⁴ NRS GD 297/229.

⁵⁵ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 133-135.

⁵⁶ *R.P.S.*, 1388/12/1, 1388/12/3. Date accessed: 16 October 2014; Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 152-153.

Buchan pledged to return all lands taken illegally from her and to prevent his own men from harassing the countess. Additionally, he promised to be a good husband to her.⁵⁷ Countess Euphemia's plans were facilitated by the bishops of Moray and Ross who were officially in charge of the divorce proceedings. Additionally, Euphemia's actions were most likely supported by the Leslie/Lindsay affinity. Both Sir James Lindsay and David Lindsay of Glen Esk were hardened enemies of Buchan.⁵⁸

Thomas Chisholm was also present, as one of the men - with Alexander Murray of Culbin and the earl of Sutherland - who gave assurances that the earl of Buchan would behave faithfully towards Countess Euphemia.⁵⁹ William Mackay took this as the basis to assume that Thomas Chisholm was an adherent of Buchan.⁶⁰ Yet Chisholm had lost territory to Buchan in 1386, and Thomas Chisholm had already joined the earl of Fife's faction when dissembling the earl of Buchan's hold on the Great Glen, and was made constable of Urquhart Castle in 1391.⁶¹ The Chisholms would later attach themselves to the lordship of the Isles by 1394.⁶² Therefore his presence could have had more to do with his dissatisfaction with Buchan and an alignment with the countess. If so the support of a family who had extensive influence in the Aird and the Great Glen was of great importance to the countess. These promises by Buchan were either not kept or were not enough, and in 1392 the terms of divorce were set; Alexander Stewart was no longer to have a say in the affairs of Ross or Ross patrimony.⁶³

Countess Euphemia

Ridding herself of Alexander Stewart did not rid Countess Euphemia of involvement in aggressive Stewart dynastic politics, or of rivals eager to maintain sway over lands which had been removed from the Ross patrimony. Although the countess's Lindsay relatives were her allies in her divorce of her Stewart husband, she may not have kept on good terms with them. In 1391 Sir James Lindsay had oversight of the barony of Kingedward, and was calling himself lord of Buchan until 1395, but in 1392 Kingedward lands were sold to Sir

⁵⁷ *Moray Reg.*, 353-354.

⁵⁸ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 171.

⁵⁹ *Moray Reg.*, 353-354.

⁶⁰ Mackay, *Urquhart and Glenmoriston*, 47.

⁶¹ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 178.

⁶² See below, 119.

⁶³ *C.P.L.*, Clement VII, 174, 181.

David Fleming who made a point of obtaining confirmation from Countess Euphemia at Stirling castle, a Fife stronghold.⁶⁴ Boardman suggests that the countess of Ross was at odds with her Lindsay relations over the barony of Kingedward as part of Ross patrimony lands, while Lindsay was seeking to control Kingedward as part of a larger plan to become the de facto earl of Buchan.⁶⁵ Hunt suggested Lindsay received important support in his bid for control of Buchan from Sir William Keith, the Marischal, based on the evidence that James Lindsay married Keith's daughter and was a witness to one of the Marischal's charters, and the Marischal's own links to the earl of Fife.⁶⁶

Since the Keiths had been allies to Countess Euphemia's father,⁶⁷ seeing this stalwart family support Lindsay rather than their traditional allegiance represented by Countess Euphemia must have been a sensitive issue. It is probable that the support Countess Euphemia received from Lindsay and his allies in the matter of her divorce was contingent upon Euphemia renouncing any remaining claims to Buchan lands which Lindsay now claimed as his own as lord of Buchan. However, Euphemia was making it clear that the territorial interests of her son came before all other considerations. Euphemia's conflict with the Lindsays over the barony of Kingedward demonstrated that any support the Lindsays may have given her in her divorce proceedings was a fleeting alignment to address a mutual goal of removing Buchan from power in the north, without the long-term cohesion of a firm alliance.

However, James Lindsay's relationship with the Keiths and the earl of Fife soured quickly. By the 1390s Sir James Lindsay, lord of Crawford, and his cousin David Lindsay of Glen Esk were again on the ascent; this corresponded with the death of King Robert II and the crowning of the earl of Carrick as Robert III. The Lindsays immediately attached themselves to Robert III's son and heir and new earl of Carrick, David, establishing their roles as political adversaries of the earl of Fife and engaging in a bloody feud in 1395 with Robert Keith, the earl of Fife's nephew.⁶⁸ This perhaps provided Countess Euphemia with the opportunity to reaffirm waning ties with the earl of Fife, the man she had previously attached herself to in seeking to divorce Alexander Stewart, a position reinforced by her

⁶⁴ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 199-200.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶⁶ Hunt, 'Albany', 229-230.

⁶⁷ See above, 85.

⁶⁸ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 198-200.

son's marriage to Fife's daughter.⁶⁹ But the differing allegiances of the countess and Lindsay only exacerbated the situation in Buchan over the status of Kingedward until Lindsay's death between April 1395 and March 1396.⁷⁰

The situation was worse for Euphemia's kinsman, William Ross, lord of Balnagown. Unlike Euphemia, his position was not immediately improved by the removal of Alexander Stewart as lord of Ross. In fact, any hopes William Ross may have had regarding the resuscitation of his kindred's interests in Buchan would be impossible if the earl of Buchan's enemies in the north-east gained possession of Buchan. James Lindsay's faction included Sir Alexander Fraser of Philorth, who had received Philorth from Walter Leslie after it had been removed from the Ross patrimony and from William Ross's inheritance. William Ross would not have reacted well to the affinity that had, ten years earlier, aided in reducing his father to the status of criminal, and destroyed his father's Buchan legacy. The support Lindsay and Fraser of Philorth may have received from Sir William Keith, a man who in times past had been an ally to William's father and uncle, signalled further the impossibility that the lord of Balnagown or Countess Euphemia would ever regain the old Buchan lands that had for so long been a part of Ross patrimony.

It is difficult to believe that William, lord of Balnagown, supported his cousin, the countess, and her son unequivocally. He also had a strong claim to the earldom through his uncle, Earl William III's, original, if circumvented, entail. If William supported Euphemia's Leslie son, he was effectively forsaking his own claim. Yet perhaps this was preferable to siding with either Alexander Stewart or James Lindsay. It is possible, but impossible to determine, that William Ross was drawn towards the alternative of strengthening bonds with the lordship of the Isles during the 1380s. Indeed, alignment with the lordship of the Isles may have seemed a logical choice as the political battle for power between Alexander Stewart, James Lindsay, and the earl of Fife played out. The weakness of these factions was apparent with the projection of Clan Donald power in the region demonstrated by Alexander of Lochaber's push into the Great Glen and Moray in the

⁶⁹ *Chron. Ross*, 2, 9. The date of Alexander Leslie's marriage may have occurred around the time of Euphemia's divorce from Alexander Stewart; see Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 200; Hunt, 'Albany', 239. But it could have taken place a year or two afterwards, when both the countess of Ross and the earl of Fife opposed the ambitions of James Lindsay.

⁷⁰ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 200.

1390s.⁷¹ Such gains gave local lords like William, lord of Balnagown, tangible reasons to increase ties with Clan Donald leadership as the power of the earl of Buchan receded.

Countess Euphemia was already issuing charters on her own during the years of her marriage to Walter Leslie. His constant preoccupation with politics of the royal court and crusader pursuits meant he was absent from Ross, leaving the countess to act in the interests of the earldom largely without Leslie interference. Her divorce from Alexander Stewart, earl of Buchan, marked a real attempt at exercising autonomy unknown in Ross since the death of Earl William III. On 4 May 1394 Countess Euphemia demonstrated her desire to cultivate strong allies in the earldom when she, with her son Alexander Leslie, granted to her ‘beloved cousin’ Hugh Munro, lord of Foulis, the lands of Western Foulis with the stronghold of ‘Strathschech’, witnessed at Dingwall by other prominent members of Hugh’s kin, Thomas and John Munro.⁷² This grant signified Countess Euphemia’s role as sole ruler in Ross without the constraints of husbands, and echoed the actions of her father who had granted the same stronghold to the then lord of Foulis, Robert Munro, although interestingly the earlier grant made by Earl William associated the fortress of ‘Strathskehech’ with Easter rather than Wester Foulis.⁷³ The countess needed a strong relationship with Munro, as the power of the lords of Foulis was formidable; on 17 October 1381 Hugh Munro was using the title of bailie of Avoch,⁷⁴ a testament to Munro power extending through their land of Findon in the barony of Avoch which had been granted earlier to the lords of Foulis by Countess Euphemia’s grandfather, Hugh, earl of Ross.⁷⁵

Months later William, lord of Balnagown was dead; on 8 August 1394 Countess Euphemia confirmed in a precept the lands of Rarichies to Walter Ross who succeeded to his father as lord of Balnagown and the Rarichies.⁷⁶ This change in Balnagown leadership represented a chance for the countess to sway the new lord’s loyalties to her son. This might have been needed if the previous lord of Balnagown had been upset about the Buchan patrimonial lands. The countess was surrounding herself with kindreds from within the earldom who could ensure its stability and provide her son with a local circle of followers to bolster his position. Indeed, the period between Countess Euphemia’s divorce from the earl of Buchan

⁷¹ See below, 118.

⁷² *Munro Writs*, 5, no. 15.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2-3, no. 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5, no. 14.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2, no. 2.

⁷⁶ NRS GD 297/178.

and her son Alexander Leslie's takeover as earl of Ross could be described as a period when the countess exercised her authority as the daughter of William III to consolidate local loyalties within the earldom.

Local solidarity may have been critical for the countess as major shifts in power occurred in northern Scotland. On 25 September 1394 the earl of Moray and Alexander of Lochaber reached an agreement in Cawdor which saw Alexander assume the role of protector of the regality of Moray.⁷⁷ The location may have held a symbolic element. The thanage of Cawdor was in the sheriffdom of Nairn, both of which were part of the hegemony of the earls of Ross. Therefore, this document represented more than Alexander's expansion into Moray. By meeting at Cawdor, where the thane of Cawdor had historically sometimes been a tenant of the earls of Ross, Alexander of Lochaber could have been signalling MacDonald interests in Ross. Alexander's control extended through the entire length of the Great Glen and may have even included control of Urquhart Castle previously held by Thomas Chisholm.⁷⁸ This effectively supplanted Stewart lordship in the region and it is difficult to view this without considering MacDonald ambitions for Ross in the scenario. As noted by Karen Hunt, the extension of MacDonald lordship up the Great Glen, the marriage of the lord of the Isles to Alexander Leslie's sister, and Alexander of Lochaber's marriage to the daughter of the earl of Lennox all indicate a conscious effort by the earl of Fife to engage politically with the lordship of the Isles, while also signalling to the MacDonalds that the earldom of Ross was perhaps negotiable.⁷⁹ If so, then Countess Euphemia and her son, Alexander Leslie, risked being sidelined by the wider politics of the kingdom.

Alexander Leslie

Exactly when Countess Euphemia passed on the leadership of Ross to her son is unknown, but on 13 August 1398 Alexander Leslie appeared as earl of Ross and heir to the countess of Ross, and granted the two 'Aygass' in Strathglass and the davoch of 'Cullyns' in the loch of 'Delgyny' to Walter Ross, who again was styled as lord of Rarichies.⁸⁰ Significantly, the earl's grant to his kinsman included lands in Strathglass, Chisholm country, which could have indicated that Leslie was trying to bolster his southern flank.

⁷⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 14.

⁷⁸ Hunt, 'Albany', 241-244.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 243-244.

⁸⁰ NRS GD 297/179.

The reality of Earl Alexander's position was that he was precariously placed between the interests of Clan Donald, the earl of Buchan and the alliance of lords headed by the earl of Fife. His mother's divorce from Buchan and Alexander of Lochaber's position in Moray had left Ross isolated from Stewart and Leslie/Lindsay factions. Earl Alexander's grant to Walter Ross may have also reflected the instability caused by the dimming relations between Clan Donald and the newly formed government of Robert III which saw the power of the kingdom reside in the hands of the king's son, David, earl of Carrick, and the earl of Fife.

Alexander Leslie's emergence as earl of Ross occurred at a time when royal Stewart struggles - both internal and with the lordship of the Isles - threatened to throw the young earl into the middle of a storm which he was ill-equipped to weather. On 21 April 1398 Sir David Lindsay of Glen Esk was made earl of Crawford and on 28 April the earl of Carrick was made Duke of Rothesay, while the earl of Fife was made Duke of Albany.⁸¹ Boardman suggests that these titles confronted the lordship of the Isles with the names rooted in Gaelic culture, consciously crafted to evoke emotions of Gaelic Scots in a propaganda battle.⁸² This corresponded with a more substantial attack on Clan Donald when on 22 April the council issued a demand for the surrender of Urquhart Castle and orchestrated a campaign against Alexander of Lochaber and the other Clan Donald leadership.⁸³

Unfortunately, very little information survives concerning the 1398 campaign against the lord of the Isles and Alexander of Lochaber, but it does seem as though the royal forces found little concrete success.⁸⁴ Indeed, Alexander of Lochaber's influence still held in Moray. In 1398 he granted 'Upper Kinmylies' to Ruari MacAlexander and Lower Kinmylies to John Chisholm of the Aird. These actions were opposed by William, bishop of Moray, who ordered the dean of the Christianity of Inverness to stop these men from obtaining possession of the Kinmylies on 20 November.⁸⁵ While the exact date of Alexander of Lochaber's initial granting of these lands remains unknown, the bishop's independent actions against Alexander of Lochaber in late November meant Alexander could still dictate terms in Moray after the royal military pressures of that summer and hold the allegiance of local men like John Chisholm of the Aird. The failure to contain the

⁸¹ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 11, 13; *Moray Reg.*, 382.

⁸² Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 207-209.

⁸³ *RPS*, 1398/6, 1398/7, 1398/8, 1398/17. Date Accessed: 16 October 2014.

⁸⁴ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 212-213.

⁸⁵ *Moray Reg.*, 211; *Invernessiana*, 94.

MacDonalds was clearly visible by 20 November 1399, when Donald, lord of the Isles, was ordered to compear before parliament after he had released his brother, Alexander, lord of Lochaber, despite the fact that Alexander had been officially named as an unruly element by the government and assigned into his brother's care.⁸⁶

Throughout the events of 1398 the one man curiously absent was Alexander Leslie, earl of Ross. Past earls of Ross were at the forefront of events in the north, especially when confronting the expansion eastward of Clans Ruari and Donald. However, Alexander Leslie was not mentioned either as a participant in the 1398 campaign against Alexander of Lochaber, or as a source of dissent towards the actions of the two royal dukes; his omission from the records speaks volumes for the reduced stature of this earl of Ross compared to his predecessors. In fact, despite the importance of controlling Ross during this period, mention of the earl of Ross by medieval chroniclers is virtually non-existent, leaving a need to extrapolate his position by political inference. Yet, despite his weak position, it seems unlikely that Earl Alexander was completely ineffectual in regional politics. Boardman suggests that Alexander Leslie was aligned with the Duke of Albany⁸⁷ and there is much to recommend this belief. It has been shown that the young earl of Ross was clearly a supporter of Albany against the weak Robert III in the political battle to control northern Scotland. This political support was reinforced through Ross's marriage to Albany's fourth daughter, Isobel, by 1398.⁸⁸ Ross was a useful ally for Albany and promised to become a great supporter of Albany's son Murdoch in controlling the north.

But was the young earl of Ross Albany's pawn? Or was the earl's allegiance to Albany tempered by political realities? The earl of Ross and his nobles must have looked upon the actions of Alexander of Lochaber with interest. Alexander of Lochaber had brought John Chisholm, a traditional agent of Stewart authority and a local power in the barony of the Aird, into his patronage, and was granting lands of Moray as its lord. Indeed, Earl Alexander's inaction as Alexander of Lochaber pursued his interests in the Great Glen and Moray may be an indication of Ross's loose alignment with the lordship of the Isles. If so, the earl of Ross was in danger of alienating himself from his benefactor Albany. In this context Earl Alexander's grant to the lord of Balnagown of land in Strathglass could be interpreted as an attempt to find a diplomatic solution to his predicament. Walter Ross could hardly be described as an ally to Stewart interests and may have maintained ties with

⁸⁶ *RPS*, 1399/11/5. Date accessed: 16 October 2014.

⁸⁷ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 179-180.

⁸⁸ *S.P.*, i, 149.

the lordship of the Isles. By increasing Walter Ross's presence in an area within close proximity to the lands held by Alexander of Lochaber and his Chisholm ally, Earl Alexander may have been trying to place a mutually acceptable lord in a strategic region that had recently been dominated by the lordship of the Isles. The immediate pressure from Alexander of Lochaber and the other Clan Donald leaders may have been enough for the earl of Ross to make a practical decision.

The impotence of the royal dukes in the face of the advancing lordship of the Isles in 1398 might have given the earl of Ross pause to consider his alignment with the Albany/Rothesay government carefully. Additionally, the power of Albany must have looked unsteady as Robert III attempted to reassert the royal line politically in the kingdom through his son, the Duke of Rothesay. Realignment with the lordship of the Isles, which received the favour of Robert III, would have shown merit if Ross thought the protection of Albany was soon to run out. The earl may even have been pressured to contemplate an alliance with Donald, lord of the Isles, by those in Ross who already had dialogue with the lordship of the Isles. Essential to Alexander Leslie's position in Ross was the cultivation of Donald as a reliable friend. Young Leslie's brother-in-law was a counter-weight which the young earl needed to protect himself from the looming presence of the duke of Albany. Alexander Leslie's insignificance in the 1398 royal campaign may have corresponded with wavering loyalties towards Stewart authority. His ties to the Albany Stewarts were perhaps balanced by his sister's status as wife of the lord of the Isles.

If Alexander Leslie had been entertaining thoughts of acceding to the pressures of Clan Donald after the failed 1398 summer campaign, he was soon denied such waverings as he was drawn further into Albany's bid to control the future heir to the kingdom, the Duke of Rothesay. The January 1399 general council formed a government which saw Rothesay act as king's lieutenant, but his power was monitored and restrained by a council of twenty-one men, among whom was the earl of Ross.⁸⁹ As Boardman noted, the bulk of the secular lords on this council were Albany's men and this was a government fashioned to use Rothesay as a means to remove Robert III from exercising power in his own kingdom.⁹⁰

The elevation of the earl of Ross to a conciliar position governing the kingdom was a great honour, but was this a reward for faithful service to Albany? During the same period,

⁸⁹ *RPS*, 1399/1/3. Date accessed: 16 October 2014.

⁹⁰ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 224-225.

patrimony lands which had been secured for Alexander Leslie by his mother's divorce from Alexander Stewart, were sold off to assuage his financial circumstances. The earl of Ross resigned his barony of Fitkill in the earldom of Fife to the king, overseen by three of Rothesay's men, David Lindsay, earl of Crawford, William Dalziel and Sir John Ramornie. Fitkill was then granted by Robert III to the earl's kinsman Sir George Leslie, an Albany adherent, on 5 February 1399.⁹¹ Two years later the earl of Ross granted to George Leslie certain lands in the barony of Kincardine, and Karen Hunt suggests that these grants were forced upon the earl of Ross due to his poor financial situation, a result of his inability to exercise authority over lands in the Ross patrimony.⁹²

The loss of his Fife barony and lands in Kincardine hardly seems an appropriate reward for an earl who at the same time was made part of the council to oversee Rothesay. Perhaps Albany had made the earl of Ross a special councillor to keep him close and preoccupied with containing Rothesay, as well as keeping the earl away from his earldom where the lordship of the Isles was gaining in influence. Boardman suggests the Fitkill grant was a demonstration of the working status between Albany and Rothesay.⁹³ If these grants were dictated by the Albany/Rothesay government to pick apart Ross patrimony lands at the expense of the earl of Ross, then Earl Alexander's loss of Fitkill and Kincardine lands could be interpreted as a punishment brought about by both Albany and Rothesay for Ross's hesitations in dealing with the lordship of the Isles. The loss of these lands and the earl's destitute finances could not have endeared the Albany/Rothesay government to the earl or to his adherents, the lords of Foulis and Balnagown.

Affairs were made more complicated by the ambitions of Godfrey of the Isles, half-brother of Donald, lord of the Isles, Godfrey's son, Angus, and the participation of nobles in the Aird. The Aird kindred, faithful vassals of the earls of Ross for generations, were demonstrating an inclination towards utilising the presence of the lordship of the Isles in Moray to achieve their own local goals. On 8 January 1401 Angus of the Isles entered into a marital indenture to marry Margaret, daughter of Margaret of the Aird, the head of the Aird family in the Aird itself; as part of the marital arrangement the davoch of Croychel and the half davoch of 'Conyr Kynbady' were granted to Angus.⁹⁴ As noted by Edmund Batten in 1877, the former davoch was located in the parish of Kilmorack, within the

⁹¹ *R.M.S.*, i, appendix ii, no. 1875.

⁹² Hunt, 'Albany', 250.

⁹³ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 224-225.

⁹⁴ *Inchaffray Liber*, l-li.

earldom of Ross, while the latter was in the parish of Conveth,⁹⁵ a parish with historical ties to the diocese of Ross. This marriage was only a prelude to further attempts at gaining land as Margaret of the Aird and Angus of the Isles agreed to attempt to regain the lands of Garthyes in Sutherland, lands resigned into the hands of the king by Alexander of the Aird, Margaret's brother. In their agreement Angus of the Isles and his wife were to obtain a quarter of the davoch while Margaret of the Aird's son, Thomas Chisholm, was to receive the rest.⁹⁶ This agreement might indicate that Margaret of the Aird was dissatisfied with her brother's resignation of northern lands and wanted to reunite those lands with the aid of her new allies.

Therefore, the evidence seems to point to the Airds and the Chisholms actively working with the lordship of the Isles in the Aird, the Great Glen, and Sutherland. The local support in the Aird and Ross for the lordship of the Isles seems to have been strong in the wake of the earl of Buchan's fall from grace; the nobles showed a preference for Clan Donald rather than closer ties to the various Stewart alternatives. The earl of Ross then must have realised that his own allegiance to Albany was a precarious thing as the local nobles in and near his own earldom were increasingly looking to the lordship of the Isles for elevation of position, security and the possibility of gaining/regaining lands. Earl Alexander's attachments to the royal government may not have given him the authority needed to be effective in his own territory. Negotiation with the lord of the Isles had to be contemplated.

If Alexander Leslie had been entertaining aspirations of aligning with the lord of the Isles, these were cut short by his death on 8 May 1402.⁹⁷ Curiously, two months later Alexander of Lochaber attacked and burnt Elgin on 3 July, an action which he atoned for three months later on 6 October but in a fashion which still saw Alexander of Lochaber's defiance when he brought with him a 'great army'.⁹⁸ Although the emphasis of Alexander of Lochaber's actions was his feud with the bishop of Moray, there could have been a more nuanced reason, given the closeness in the dates between the death of Alexander Leslie and Alexander of Lochaber's attack on Elgin. The death of the earl might have signalled a need for Clan Donald to demonstrate their strength in the area, especially if Alexander Leslie and Walter Ross, lord of Balnagown, had been trying to cultivate relations with the lordship of the Isles.

⁹⁵ Batten, *Charters of the Priory of Beaulieu*, 94.

⁹⁶ *Inchaffray Liber*, l-li.

⁹⁷ *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 29.

⁹⁸ *Moray Reg.*, 382-383.

The Lord of the Isles and Albany

With Leslie's death the earldom once again became the focus of Scottish politics, and Leslie's sole heir, his daughter Euphemia, was now the most desirable asset for controlling northern Scotland. The earl's death was compounded by the larger power vacuum left by the death of the Duke of Rothesay in March 1402⁹⁹ and the Scottish defeat at the hands of the English at Humbleton in September 1402, which removed, through death or imprisonment, the bulk of the ruling men of Scotland, most crucially Albany's own son and heir Murdoch, justiciar north of the Forth, and Albany's ally Archibald, fourth earl of Douglas, along with the earls of Angus, Orkney and Moray and many other significant figures.¹⁰⁰ As pointed out by Boardman, the year 1402 saw the cumulative removal of the earls of Angus, Douglas, Orkney, Moray, Ross, the lord of Mar, the Duke of Rothesay (also earl of Carrick and Atholl). The old order of Scottish politics had been removed and Albany needed to turn to his old nemesis, his brother the earl of Buchan and his sons, to provide a buffer from Donald, lord of the Isles and Alexander, lord of Lochaber.¹⁰¹

Possession of Ross immediately following the death of Alexander Leslie was a confused period, with both the lord of the Isles and Albany vying for supremacy in the earldom. Albany seems to have made the initial moves and had control of the barony of Kingedward by 15 November 1403.¹⁰² By 11 July 1405 in Dingwall he functioned as lord of the ward of Ross where he granted the sheriffdom of Nairn to Donald, thane of Cawdor.¹⁰³ Additionally, the earl of Buchan was experiencing a small resurgence in power, a resurgence which had the potential to threaten those who had supported Countess Euphemia in her divorce. By August 1404 Buchan's natural son, Alexander, had manoeuvred himself into position to become earl of Mar by compelling Isabella, countess of Mar into a contract of marriage.¹⁰⁴ This event was reluctantly agreed to by Albany, who had lost his major

⁹⁹ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 40-41.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-49.

¹⁰¹ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 246-247.

¹⁰² *Abdn. Reg.*, 208-209.

¹⁰³ *Cawdor Bk.*, 4-5. As noted by C. Innes, these events in 1405 indicate the thanes of Cawdor held their land from the earl of Ross, rather than directly from the king, see *Cawdor Bk.*, xii-xiv. If so, perhaps the Duke of Albany was the source of this superimposition of the earldom of Ross over Cawdor's offices and lands. This could be an indication that Donald of Cawdor was an Albany man and that Albany was inserting his own adherents into prominent places within the Ross sphere of influence.

¹⁰⁴ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1239.

allies north of the Forth in the previous two years.¹⁰⁵ From a Ross perspective the earl of Buchan's renewed power was having an effect in the Inverness region. On 8 July 1404 the lord of Lovat requested Buchan's protection.¹⁰⁶ Presumably this arrangement was to limit the power of Clan Donald in the region. The Badenoch threat was made more apparent when Buchan was granted control over Inverness.¹⁰⁷ This gave Buchan a base of authority uncomfortably close to Ross and could have been interpreted as a prelude to the reassertion of Buchan and his son, the new earl of Mar, in Ross.

For the nobles of Ross, who had seen Buchan grab lordship in Ross through Countess Euphemia in 1382, the events in the earldom of Mar in 1404 and the reestablishment of Buchan in close proximity to the earldom were indicative of the dangerous nature of the next generation of Badenoch Stewarts. If Buchan and his son could orchestrate the takeover of Mar via an heiress with the belated complicity of Albany and Robert III rendering the actions legitimate, then Euphemia, the vulnerable Ross heiress, could have a similar future in store. The political tensions were further complicated by the death of Alexander Stewart, earl of Buchan, an event which Boardman has argued occurred in July 1405,¹⁰⁸ and in September 1406 the Duke of Albany bestowed and ratified his son John Stewart as the new earl of Buchan.¹⁰⁹ This signalled that John Stewart was likely his father's choice for controlling the earldom of Ross.

The nobles of Ross were faced with a quandary: support the rights of the young Euphemia controlled by Albany, or transfer their allegiance to the claim of Mary Leslie, sister of the recently deceased Earl Alexander and wife of Donald, lord of the Isles. Supporting Mary meant defying the Duke of Albany and the Stewarts in general, gravitating towards an entirely different dynastic lordship. This was something many of them may have embraced, particularly since Alexander Leslie may have been trying to establish connections with the lordship of the Isles. If the men of Ross did hesitate over who to support it was probably short-lived. As Boardman has demonstrated, by 1404 the earl of Buchan was reviving his political power in the Inverness region with the reluctant support of Albany to enforce Stewart power.¹¹⁰ Albany's revival of Buchan most likely pushed Ross

¹⁰⁵ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 261-266.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 260-261.

¹⁰⁷ *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix ii, no. 1936.

¹⁰⁸ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 288.

¹⁰⁹ Hunt, 'Albany', 256.

¹¹⁰ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 260-266.

nobles, such as the lords of Balnagown and Foulis, into the awaiting arms of the lord of the Isles.

Local fear of Buchan may have been a factor in allowing Donald, lord of the Isles, to gain control of Dingwall sometime between 1405 and 1411.¹¹¹ But reasons for shifting loyalties to the lordship of the Isles could have run deeper than trying to avoid the recurrence of any Buchan presence in the earldom. The lordship of the Isles offered an alternative to the dangerous political games of the royal Stewart brothers, an alternative that may have seemed more stable to the magnates of Ross. Donald, lord of the Isles and his kinsman Alexander, lord of Lochaber, had been a nearby source of continuity and strength as the Leslie legacy crumbled amidst the ever changing balance of power amongst the royal Stewarts. The steady, if aggressive, style of leadership being exercised by Clan Donald may have been a seductive inducement.

Ross and Harlaw

In the history of the Highlands the battle of Harlaw is perhaps the most commented-on event of the late medieval period. A battle which captured the imagination of generations of Scots, it has been portrayed at different times as a MacDonald attempt to enforce their claims to the earldom of Ross, a destructive raid towards Aberdeen, an attempt to assert the independence of the Highlands and even a bid at the kingship.¹¹² It is not the intention of this thesis to further saturate the discussion regarding Harlaw's political objectives, or to attempt a detailed study of the context of the sources themselves. Nevertheless, since central to this thesis is the dialogue between the earldom of Ross and its western neighbours, this study would not be complete without considering Harlaw's connection to the earldom and its nobility. The following section is focused solely on the participation of the nobility of Ross in the battle.

Walter Bower's account of Harlaw provides the first source that cites the nobles of Ross were complicit in the military campaign of the lord of the Isles.

In 1411 on the eve of St James the Apostle there was a battle at Harlaw in Mar, when Donald of the Isles with 10,000 men from the Isles and his men of Ross

¹¹¹ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 76-77; Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 259.

¹¹² For recent studies of Harlaw see, Ian A. Olson, *Bludie Harlaw: Realities, Myths, Ballads* (Edinburgh, 2014).

entered the district, crushing and pillaging everything and reducing it to waste. His aim on that expedition was to sack the royal town of Aberdeen and then to subject to his authority the country down to the river Tay.¹¹³

Unfortunately, Bower only gives a general idea of Ross support for Donald's campaign, and it is left to other sources to expound on this. John Mair is even more vague, stating that Donald of the Isles had gathered an army of 'Wild Scots'.¹¹⁴ Hector Boece gives a more specific description and claimed

...he gathered together from the Hebrides a large body of men, partly by coercion, partly by goodwill; and taking them with him he attacked Ross-shire, and with no great trouble brought it under his own control, with the inhabitants of Ross-shire being in no way averse to taking back Donald as the rightful heir.¹¹⁵

Clearly Boece saw the population of Ross as facilitating Donald's eastern thrust. George Buchanan's account of Harlaw relates:

In the following year, A.D. 1411, Donald, lord of the Aebudae, having, as next heir, which indeed he was, demanded the restoration of Ross, taken from him by the governor under some legal pretext, and finding himself denied justice, collected ten thousand of his Islanders, and made a descent upon the continent, where he easily took possession of Ross, every one cheerfully returning to the vassalage of their rightful lord. This ready submission of the inhabitants of Ross, excited his mind, naturally ambitious, to attempt greater exploits.¹¹⁶

Buchanan evidently envisioned the lords of Ross welcoming MacDonald with open arms, their own loyalties the catalyst to encourage further penetration east. In this Buchanan was similar to Bower and Boece, describing a populace favourable to Clan Donald.

Later sources can be equally frustrating in identifying pro-Donald support in Ross at Harlaw. Sir Robert Gordon states that Donald attacked and spoiled the earldom of Ross with an army composed of Islanders, defeated the Mackays in battle, and subsequently met

¹¹³ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 74-75.

¹¹⁴ Major, *History*, 348.

¹¹⁵ Olson, *Bludie Harlaw*, 26-27.

¹¹⁶ Buchanan, *History*, ii, 78.

no resistance, but rather was joined by ‘Highlanders’ as he passed through Ross and Moray on his way towards Aberdeen.¹¹⁷ The Ross Chronicle gives only the briefest of mentions to Harlaw and does not give any indication that nobles of Ross joined MacDonald.¹¹⁸ Other late sources are more detailed. The earl of Cromartie states that with the exception of the MacKenzies, all the northern clans joined Donald.¹¹⁹ This suggests an almost uniform support for the lordship of the Isles from both Easter and Wester Ross. The pro-Donald *Sleat History* records that Donald mustered 10,000 men but then sent four thousand of them home, that Donald was hesitant to allow his men to forage in Ross as it was his country, and lists several clans which joined Donald including the Mackintoshes, MacKenzies, and Camerons, while three Munro leaders joined Donald and were killed at Harlaw.¹²⁰ The MacKenzies’ reported presence conflicts with Cromartie’s account but more important is the identification of the Munro men. Further support in Easter Ross for Clan Donald most likely came from Walter Ross, lord of Balnagown, whose family had cultivated a close alliance with the lordship of the Isles since the 1360s.¹²¹ It has been suggested that Walter was a primary facilitator in helping the lord of the Isles extend his control over Ross prior to Harlaw.¹²² Together with the lord of Foulis, this would mean the two most powerful magnates in the earldom, aided the lord of the Isles at Harlaw, indicating major support in Ross for Donald’s cause.

The *Wardlaw MS* voices a very anti-MacDonald perspective, yet grudgingly acknowledges a widespread support for Donald at Harlaw by the population of the earldom.

The next yeare Donald of the Isles, pretending a right to Rosse, and that the governour detained it unjustly of him, convocats and rises in arms to maintain his own right, made a descend with his army into Ross who rise with him, reduce Murray to his obedience, proceeds in depredations through Strathbogy, threatens Aberdeen, alarmes the kingdom;...¹²³

¹¹⁷ Gordon, *Sutherland*, 62-63.

¹¹⁸ *Chron. Ross*, 2-3.

¹¹⁹ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 469. Cromartie was writing to confirm the rights of the MacKenzies to authority over northern Scotland, and should be viewed with skepticism.

¹²⁰ *H.P.*, i, 29.

¹²¹ See above Chapter 2.

¹²² Hunt, ‘Albany’, 264.

¹²³ *Wardlaw*, 92.

And when he could get no right, he levied a 1000 Islanders and made a descent on the continent, and so easely seased on Ross, the whole country being willing to return to the subjection of their own just master; but this facility in the men of Ross, in submitting to him whose mind was greedy of prey, gave him incurragement to attempt greater maters¹²⁴

Wardlaw seems to derive from Buchanan's account: that Ross was a welcoming region for Donald, and that this encouraged Donald to pursue further action. *Wardlaw*'s obvious bias against Ross and the MacDonalds, along with the lateness of the source, is tempered by its agreement with the majority of earlier sources in aligning the people of Ross with the MacDonalds in the prelude to Harlaw.

Because of its local focus, perhaps the *Wardlaw MS* can give a unique perspective of how the lords of the Aird were situated in 1411. The Fraser chronicle vehemently claims that the Frasers of Lovat resisted MacDonald advances and demands for their assistance. The *Wardlaw MS* clearly uses as its own source John Mair, going so far as to quote Mair regarding the daring of an Inverness burgess in the face of MacDonald aggression.¹²⁵ Yet if we accept this account, despite its clear prejudice, it reveals that the Frasers were seen as an ally by Clan Donald, whom Donald had called upon to join him. Donald may have even regarded the Frasers as his tenants through controlling Ross, and although they were unwilling to fight for Clan Donald themselves, they were not necessarily allies to the Albany government either. This might be construed as the general situation in the Aird where local lords must have been in a difficult position, owing allegiance for some of their lands to whomever was the earl of Ross.

Since the majority of sources indicate that the men of Ross supported MacDonald, the probability is high that a significant proportion of magnates in the earldom joined the lord of the Isles in his campaign. This seems to indicate that the Stewart political mismanagement of Ross had turned the lords of Ross against Stewart lordship. This could have stemmed from as early as 1372, when Robert II refused to undo David II's disenfranchisement of Hugh of Philorth and the resulting ousting of the traditional MacTaggart leadership. The earl of Mar in 1404 may also have represented a dangerous current threat to many in Ross, a repeat of his father's activities in Ross, particularly if

¹²⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Mar's mother gave him further claim to interests in the earldom. Joining MacDonald was arguably as much a protest against Stewart interference in the earldom as it was a genuine belief in the claim of Donald and Mary. Inevitably the political stances of the leaders in Ross regarding MacDonald sympathies cannot be adequately determined from the evidence concerning Harlaw in isolation, but instead must be determined through the subsequent activities as the MacDonald era as earls of Ross began.

The aftermath of Harlaw saw the Albany government making efforts to capitalise on the military retreat of Clan Donald. According to Bower, Albany captured Dingwall Castle later that same year, and in the summer of 1412 penetrated into Ross in a campaign which brought the lord of the Isles to terms at Lochgilp.¹²⁶ This presumably left Albany and Mar in charge of an earldom of Ross rife with discontent and instability, with a large segment of the local magnates adversarial towards the Stewart lords. One priority for Albany and Mar was pacifying local resistance in the earldom of Ross. In 1413 the exchequer paid various 'captains' £24 to subdue the inhabitants of Ross.¹²⁷ Unfortunately the captains remained unnamed, leaving their identity difficult to determine, but these unnamed captains proved less than competent and by 1414 the exchequer paid a further £10 to Kenneth 'Murchirson' of Ross for the restoration of peace to the earldom.¹²⁸ These payments reveal the continued resistance to Albany's authority in the earldom, despite Clan Donald's temporary withdrawal and the inability of Albany to find reliable men to administer the earldom effectively. Apparently Kenneth's mandate included aggressions against his own kin and in 1415 the exchequer recorded money spent on the brothers Alexander and Ruari 'Murchirsoun', who were prisoners at Inverness.¹²⁹ William Matheson convincingly argues that these two men were the leaders of the Mathesons who had supported the lord of the Isles at Harlaw, and that they were captured by Kenneth MacKenzie – at that time of the same kindred.¹³⁰

The political divisions in Ross were splitting kindreds apart as Harlaw and the subsequent Albany campaign through the north Highlands forced those caught in the middle to choose sides. Aside from the Kenneth 'Murchirson' of Ross mentioned by the exchequer rolls

¹²⁶ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 77; *E.R.*, iv, 213, 239.

¹²⁷ *E.R.*, iv, 189.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 228. The editor, George Burnett, suggested that Kenneth Murchirson was a Mackenzie but the imprisoned Alexander and Ruari Murchirsoun were Mathesons, see *ibid.*, lxxvi-lxxvii (footnote no. 5).

¹³⁰ Matheson, 'Traditions of the Mathesons', 159-160.

there is little evidence that the magnates of Ross joined in Albany's efforts to push Clan Donald out of Ross, or participated in the enforcement of Albany policy within the earldom. Indeed, the nobles of Ross, including the two most important eastern nobles of the earldom, the lords of Balnagown and Foulis, were conspicuously absent from official records. Yet they were indispensable if Albany wanted effective administration in the earldom. The apparent incapability of Albany's government to convince Ross magnates to forsake the lordship of the Isles might be seen in 1416 when funds were allotted by the exchequer for prisoners from Ross.¹³¹ These prisoners may have consisted of those men whose capture Albany had ordered in 1413 and/or the men Kenneth 'Murchirson' was commissioned to apprehend in 1414. If so, these men were most likely political prisoners, incarcerated because they represented focal points around which anti-Albany/pro-MacDonald sentiment could have been centred. If this was the case, it was hardly a political success for Albany that dissidents continued to threaten Stewart control of Ross for at least six years after Harlaw, and three years after Albany had originally commissioned 'captains' to suppress dissenters in the earldom.

The lord of Balnagown's discontent with Stewart lordship in Ross increased dramatically in the aftermath of Harlaw. By 1412 the ill-will between the lord of Balnagown and Albany was made readily apparent when the Duke recognanced some of the holdings of Balnagown because Walter had offended the Duke in some manner. Walter decided to fight against the Duke through legal channels and employed the services of one Richard Comyn to regain the lost lands. Comyn compeared before Albany on 21 June 1412 with the conclusion that the Duke would lift punishment from Walter Ross because he had submitted to common law, yet Walter offered a Parthian shot of defiance by refusing to compear before the Duke by using a supposed illness as an excuse.¹³² If the lord of Balnagown had not already chosen to support the claims of the lord of the Isles, then the events of 1412 could have been the final push in making this important Ross noble throw his lot in with the fortunes of Clan Donald.

In addition to the unsuccessful efforts to impose his will on local authorities, Albany, aided by the earl of Mar, was also strengthening the defensive capabilities of Inverness Castle throughout the 1410s.¹³³ It is noteworthy that the focus of Albany and Mar was on

¹³¹ *E.R.*, iv, 255.

¹³² NRS GD 297/195. Karen Hunt considers that the friction between Balnagown and Albany stemmed from Balnagown's support of the lord of the Isles at Harlaw, see Hunt, 'Albany', 264.

¹³³ *E.R.*, iv, 145, 163, 173, 211, 227-228, 255, 265.

Inverness rather than those strongholds more pertinent to the defence of Ross itself. Dingwall Castle does not feature in the exchequer rolls in the 1410s, nor does any other castle in Ross. Instead, the Albany/Mar strategy seems to have been to base all Ross operations from Inverness, extending Stewart power into Ross through punitive military measures from a rebuilt Inverness Castle. This was supplemented by Albany's 'captains' concerned with pacifying the earldom. Albany's strategy seems to have been primarily one of containment, strikingly reminiscent of King William's castle building/raid strategy of 1179.¹³⁴ Such a strategy was based on intimidation rather than cultivation of the Ross kindreds. This was hardly an effective way for the earldom of Ross to be brought back into the Stewart fold. In this context Albany pressured Euphemia Leslie to give up her rights to the earldom and apparently enter a nunnery soon afterwards, while Albany set up his son, John Stewart, the earl of Buchan, to obtain his second earldom, the earldom of Ross in June 1415.¹³⁵

It was these failures by Albany and Mar which enabled Donald, lord of the Isles, to continue to exert authority in Ross, despite the new titular Stewart earl of Ross. One of the most important immediate developments for Ross which resulted from Harlaw was the agreement reached by MacDonald with the Mackays of Strathnaver, which was destined to fundamentally transform the political landscape of northern Ross. On 8 October 1415 Donald, lord of the Isles, granted the lands of Strath Halladale and Ferincoskry to Angus and Neil Mackay. This was done within the lordship of the Isles and the two named witnesses were Lachlan MacLean and Ruari Macleod.¹³⁶ In this, the MacDonald lord was acting as the earl of Ross even without the title officially being bestowed upon him; Ferincoskry had been held by the earls of Ross since the late thirteenth century. This grant was a political coup for Donald; in addition to strengthening the bonds of friendship between the Mackays and the lordship of the Isles, this grant demonstrated Donald's ability to dictate land distribution in the earldom. Not only could the MacDonald lord grant away the Ross holdings in the earldom of Sutherland, but he could do so without the inclusion of the nobility of Ross or the titular earl of Ross, John Stewart.

Donald had managed to placate the Mackays of Strathnaver and demonstrate his ability to exercise power over Ross lands, but at what cost? Lordship in Ferincoskry had been

¹³⁴ *Chron. Melrose*, 42, 46; English translation can be found in *E.S.*, ii, 301-302, 312-313; *Scotichronicon*, iv, 336-337.

¹³⁵ *S.P.*, vii, 242-243; Hunt, 'Albany', 275.

¹³⁶ *A.L.I.*, no. 19; *Mackay Book*, 375-376; *Clan Donald*, i, 512.

associated with the earls of Ross since the First War of Scottish Independence and had remained a symbol of Ross pre-eminence over the rest of northern Scotland despite recurrent attempts by others to wrestle it away. If Ross of Balnagown was indeed an ally of Donald at Harlaw, then it must be wondered how he felt watching his MacDonald ally grant away a piece of land which had been for so long associated with his inheritance. Tension between the lords of Balnagown and the lords of the Isles over Ferincoskry continued for the rest of the century and was the foundation for one of the longest-lasting feuds in Highland history, that between Clan Ross and the Mackays of Strathnaver.¹³⁷ The major political victory which accompanied the tactical stalemate of Harlaw eventually saw the earldom of Ross handed over to the MacDonalds. This enormous gain has understandably diminished in the eyes of historians the political blunders Donald made before his son assumed the title of earl of Ross. Unfortunately for Donald and Alexander, their own contemporaries were not as willing to overlook this blunder; the seeds of friction between the future MacDonald earls of Ross and the Rosses of Balnagown had been sown.

The 1415 Ferincoskry grant had one further implication. John Stewart, the new earl of Buchan and Ross, did not have title to the barony of Kingedward, but on 15 June 1415 he received an entail to it.¹³⁸ This meant that the earl of Buchan did not possess rights to an important barony within his earldom for his first nine years as earl, a stark contrast to how John's uncle, Alexander Stewart, had become earl of Buchan in 1382 when he started using the title earl of Buchan only after receiving Kingedward through Countess Euphemia. It hardly seems a coincidence that 1415 was the same year in which Donald, lord of the Isles, issued his charter concerning Ferincoskry. Kingedward could have been a bargaining piece in the aftermath of Harlaw between Donald, lord of the isles, and the Duke of Albany in an understanding which saw Donald issuing charters for Ross territory in exchange for not interfering further in affairs in those Ross patrimony lands further east in Buchan. This arrangement was in the interests of both factions since the intentions of the earl of Mar in Buchan and Badenoch threatened to upset the balance of power. Albany in particular needed to reach an understanding with the lord of the Isles because, despite all efforts by Albany and William Keith, the Marischal, John Stewart's grasp on Buchan was tenuous.¹³⁹ If an agreement of this sort had been reached by the lord of the Isles and Albany, it may have offered some semblance of stability for Ross. However, as these two

¹³⁷ See below, 156-157, 219-220.

¹³⁸ *R.M.S.*, i, Appendix ii, no. 1976.

¹³⁹ Hunt, 'Albany', 257-259.

powerful men divided control of the earldom and its extended territories between themselves, they may have sidelined the interests of local magnates who had defied Albany and Mar at Harlaw. The man most apt to feel such consternation would have been the lord of Balnagown; not only were his kindred's lands in Ferincoskry handed over to the Mackays, but his Clan Donald allies seemingly yielded to Albany's plans for Buchan.

If the lord of the Isles was trying to find a negotiated settlement with Albany in 1415 it was complemented by overtures to Thomas Dunbar, earl of Moray, as well. On 16 August 1420 at the seat of Ross ecclesiastical power in Rosemarkie many notable magnates headed by John, bishop of Ross and Mary Leslie, lady of the Isles and of Ross, assembled in order to seal testimonials to the fact that they had witnessed Thomas, earl of Moray regrant the lands in the sheriffdom of Inverness to William Graham who had resigned them into the hands of the earl. The list of local nobles was extensive; Mary was accompanied by two representatives of the Isles, John MacLeod, lord of Glenelg, and Angus Godredson [Mac Goraidh] of the Isles, while the bishop of Ross was joined by William 'Fayrhar' [MacFarquhar?]. The rest of the witnesses comprised Hugh Fraser, lord of Lovat, John Urquhart, lord of Cromarty, Donald, thane of Cawdor, John Rose, lord of Kilravock, Walter Innes, lord of Innes, Walter Douglas, sheriff of Elgin, John Sinclair, lord of Deskford, and John MacIain, lord of Ardnamurchan.¹⁴⁰

Michael Brown suggests that this event was an attempt by the earl of Moray to curry favour with the lord of the Isles in order to combat the influence of the earl of Mar, who had monopolised the support of the Albany Stewarts.¹⁴¹ If this is correct and this charter represented a willingness by Thomas Dunbar to accept Clan Donald as a necessary counter to the earl of Mar, then it would follow that many of the other witnesses present were also willing to accept Clan Donald's claim to Ross. This meant that nobles who held land in Ross, the Aird, Moray and Buchan were aligning themselves with Clan Donald rather than the titular earl of Ross and Buchan, John Stewart. If this charter does give a glimpse of Mary's adherents, then Donald MacDonald had successfully brought into the fold the most important men neighbouring the earldom, many of whom traditionally held their lands from the earls of Ross, while John, bishop of Ross, gave important ecclesiastic support.

¹⁴⁰ *A.L.I.*, no. 20. The editors of *A.L.I.* believed John of Nairn should read John MacIain, see *ibid.*, comment.

¹⁴¹ Michael Brown, 'Regional Lordship in North-East Scotland: The Badenoch Stewarts II. Alexander Stewart Earl of Mar', *Northern Scotland*, xvi (1996), 31-54, 37-38.

This event and the 1415 Ferincoskry charter suggest Donald and his wife were exercising diplomacy and compromise after Harlaw to gain powerful allies in their pursuit of Ross. Unfortunately, there is no further evidence of Mary's practical involvement in Ross affairs during her husband's remaining years, but as noted by Steer and Bannerman, the papal records in 1420-1421 refer to Donald as *comitatus Rossie* – of the earldom of Ross - a title attributed to husbands of a countess.¹⁴² Therefore it might be assumed that Donald and Mary continued to invest themselves in Ross despite John Stewart's holding the title earl of Ross.

Conclusion

David II's disruptive action of imposing Walter Leslie on the hapless Euphemia in the 1360s ushered in a period of two Leslie and one Stewart lords, who exercised unstable forms of lordship in Ross which was arguably the most detrimental period to the prosperity of the earldom at any point in the middle ages. Despite his formidable reputation as a crusader and a close favourite of the king, Walter Leslie was unable to establish himself with the local nobles of Ross in any significant way. He remained an outsider whose only redeeming quality was his marriage to Earl William's daughter, Countess Euphemia. Even this was no guarantee of Leslie's acceptance; the free tenants of Ross had after all expressed their agreement with the 1350s entail which would have seen Hugh of Philorth replace Euphemia in inheriting the earldom. Leslie's position in Ross was destabilised further by Stewart ambitions, and while Alexander Stewart, lord of Badenoch could have been a source of concern for Sir Walter, an equal threat to Leslie's hold on Ross during his lifetime was likely Alexander's younger half-brother, David, earl of Strathearn, who seems to have capitalised on his status as the king's son and nephew to the late Earl William III to act as patron to certain nobleman in the earldom of Ross.

Royal policy towards Ross during the reign of Robert II compounded the failures of those directly responsible for the governance of the earldom. David II's unwelcome intrusions were not reversed by Robert II, despite his being married to Earl William III's sister. If anything Robert II worsened perceptions of royal trustworthiness when he promoted the interests of his sons in Ross and in the neighbouring lordships. The earldom had seen its countess passed unceremoniously from one unwanted husband to another, with the royal authority acting the part of matchmaker. Robert III's kingship held the promise of

¹⁴² C.S.S.R., i, 172-173; *ibid.*, ii, 188-189; *H.P.*, iv, 166-171; Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 149.

containing his younger brother, but he chose not to for the sake of larger political reasons to which the fate of Ross was inconsequential. It was left to the guardianship of Albany, then earl of Fife, to aid Ross, but any credibility Albany gained in Ross by assisting Euphemia in ridding herself of Alexander Stewart was of little importance next to the prospect of Albany repeating the actions of David II in subverting the ruling family in the earldom to suit his own purposes. Royal authority demonstrated little respect to those in Ross who held loyalty to Countess Euphemia and her son Alexander Leslie, and even less for those in the earldom who might still have supported the claim to the earldom the lords of Balnagown had through the descent of Hugh of Philorth.

Moreover, as the nobles of Ross were continuously shunted to the periphery of Scottish policy by the royal authority, they were able to watch the increasingly hostile infighting of the Stewarts. Robert II's sons were constantly occupied with fighting amongst each other to control the kingdom, culminating in the death of the Duke of Rothesay while in the keeping of his uncle, the Duke of Albany, in 1402. The inability of the Stewarts to reach consensus concerning the governance of the kingdom was just another factor which could have facilitated the desire to seek alternative sources of authority. The most obvious alternative was Clan Donald, whose domain remained for the most part beyond the power of the Stewarts. If traditional clan and later chronicle sources are to be believed, this alternative was taken up by many in Ross as Donald, lord of the Isles, advanced his claims to the Ross inheritance. It is entirely possible that Ross nobility played an influential role in Donald's march to Harlaw, with men like the lord of Balnagown possibly being key members of Donald's council, urging him on to reclaim the Ross patrimony in Buchan. Indeed, one possibility underlying the Harlaw campaign could have been the lord of Balnagown's own desire to regain the lordship of Philorth which would have fitted in nicely with Clan Donald ambitions if the lord of the Isles had designs on reassembling the old Ross domain built by the MacTaggart dynasty.

By the 1420s Donald's son, Alexander, lord of the Isles, began to use the title earl of Ross, presumably inheriting the support of the earldom's nobility that his father seemed to have enjoyed. It was likely many in Ross could sigh with relief at the advent of a lord powerful enough to shield the earldom from further Stewart politicking, and who held the potential to offer more profitable patronage. Whatever the emotions evoked by Alexander MacDonald in Ross, his tenure of the earldom had the potential to bring about great change. The earldom was about to experience a resurgence in authoritative lordship and

stable patronage, things which had been lacking since 1372, following the death of Earl William III, the last of the MacTaggart earls.

Chapter III: MacDonald Lordship in Ross: 1420-1449

This chapter introduces MacDonald lordship in Ross and attempts to understand how Alexander MacDonald, lord of the Isles, was able to establish himself as earl and maintain his position while major events were incurring changes on a national stage. The advent of the MacDonald lordship in Ross is accompanied by an increase in primary source material. The sources gathered from chronicles, royal charters and exchequer accounts are supplemented by documents issued by the lords of the Isles as earls of Ross. Most of these documents are concerned with the internal administration of the earldom and the extension of patronage by Alexander, allowing research on the earldom to delve further into local administration. This is in stark contrast to the preceding lords of Ross; it is ironic that the acts of the Leslie and Stewart regimes in Ross, supported intermittently by royal authority, had less success being preserved through surviving records than the relative wealth of information known about the MacDonald earls. The successful preservation of documents regarding local Ross issues can be attributed to the later period of time and, perhaps it can be argued, the success of the lords of the Isles at projecting themselves into the legacy of the earldom. A significant difference is that traditional clan histories provide a noticeable increase in details to their narratives of the period, usually constituting efforts to legitimise their respective claims to lands or loyalties, either by implicating the connection to, or contrasting themselves with, the MacDonald earls.

The chapter begins with a narrative and examination of Alexander MacDonald's initial establishment as earl of Ross and his relationship with James I. The chapter then extends to include discussion of the earl's attempts to cultivate new allies who could be beneficial for maintaining his earldom. This is followed by evaluating the administration and patronage of the earldom under MacDonald rule, with emphasis on determining how MacDonald exercise of lordship was different from previous rulers and whether there were elements of continuity. The final section of the chapter investigates the importance of the clerical battle to control the diocese of Ross and how this affected the secular politics of the earl of Ross and his local tenants.

A Clan Donald Earldom

When Alexander became lord of the Isles in 1423¹ he inherited the MacDonald claim to Ross. His claim was strengthened by the removal of the Albany power bloc. Robert, Duke of Albany was dead by September 1420, John, earl of Buchan (and Ross), was killed on the French battlefield of Verneuil in 1424 and Murdoch, the second Duke of Albany, was executed by James I in May 1425.² These deaths most likely facilitated the lord of the Isles in wresting control of Ross, whose mother was seen on 16 August 1420 as ‘Dame Mary of the Ile lady of the Ylis and of Ross’.³ The downfall of Duke Murdoch was caused by the return of James I who was freed from his English captivity in the spring of 1424⁴ and who had a vendetta to pursue against the Albany Stewarts for their role in the death of his elder brother, David, duke of Rothesay and for prolonging his own confinement.⁵ Clan Donald diplomatic overtures to James I during his years of imprisonment,⁶ and their mutual desire to remove the power of Albany, succeeded in achieving recognition of Alexander’s claims to Ross. The *Book of ClanRanald* states that James I confirmed Alexander MacDonald in the earldom after his return from imprisonment in England.⁷ Walter Bower’s account of a May 1425 parliament which saw the Duke of Albany removed from power indicated Alexander MacDonald had control of Ross.⁸ Michael Brown suggests James I recognised Mary and Alexander’s claims to Ross in 1425 during the parliament session which saw the downfall of Albany, and that this confirmation was a tool to secure the lord of the Isles’ support in those proceedings.⁹ If so, Alexander had the royal blessing when he was using the title *magister comitatus Rossie* [master of the earldom of Ross] in June 1427.¹⁰

Though Alexander MacDonald and James I found common ground through their mutual goal of reducing the power of Albany in 1425, things were not to remain congenial

¹ *A.L.I.*, no. 21.

² *Scotichronicon*, viii, 125, 133, 245.

³ *A.L.I.*, no. 20.

⁴ Brown, *James I*, 40; *Foedera* (O), x, 326-332.

⁵ For a comprehensive study of James I’s attack on the Albany Stewarts see Brown, *James I*, 40-67.

⁶ *Rotuli Scotiae*, ii, 196-197; *C.D.S.*, iv, no. 806.

⁷ *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 161.

⁸ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 245.

⁹ Brown, *James I*, 58.

¹⁰ *A.L.I.*, no. 21; *C.S.S.R.*, ii, 133. The title Bower uses for Alexander, *magister comitatus Rossie*, indicates that Alexander’s mother, Mary, was the countess and Alexander the intended heir, see Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 149.

between the lord of the Isles and his sovereign. By the beginning of 1428 Alexander began using the title ‘of the earldom of Ross’.¹¹ However, this seems to have provoked an immediate royal response. Michael Brown suggests James I took action to control the inheritance of Ross himself in April 1428 by assuming the deceased earl of Buchan’s claim, given up by Robert Stewart, the king’s cousin and a surviving son of Robert, Duke of Albany.¹² This was made clear in August 1428 when the king invited the lord of the Isles and the various chieftains of the Highlands, amongst whom were Angus Dubh Mackay, Kenneth Mor, John Ross, William Leslie, Angus Murray, Alexander MacRuari, John MacArthur, and the chief of the Mathesons, to meet with him at Inverness only to imprison them to await his pleasure and judgement.¹³

John Mair, in his later account, repeated most of Bower’s list but added that Kenneth MacKenzie was the father-in-law of John Ross, lord of Balnagown, labelling all of them ‘Wild Scots’.¹⁴ It must be noted that Bower’s listing the lord of Balnagown as John Ross is incorrect. John Ross was not given sasine of the Balnagown lands until 21 January 1440. Therefore, the lord of Balnagown who was the king’s captive in 1428 must have been John’s father, Hugh Ross, the man who had been significant to Donald, lord of the Isles, leading up to the battle of Harlaw. Additionally, Mair might be incorrect, as neither Hugh nor John was recorded as being married to a daughter of MacKenzie in the traditional Ross chronicle, but instead, they were married to the daughters of the earl of Sutherland and Torquil MacLeod, lord of Lewis, respectively.¹⁵ William Leslie, Kenneth MacKenzie, Angus Murray and John Ross were not vassals of the lord of the Isles.

The disquiet in northern Scotland which King James I wished to crush was not limited to those clans over which Alexander MacDonald exercised lordship. Nonetheless, these men were viewed as having been contributors to the king’s discomfort. As already noted in the introduction, it is interesting to note that Ross of Balnagown and William Leslie were included in Mair’s grouping of ‘Wild Scots’. These men were not descended from families noted for being ‘wild’. Both were from the higher echelons of Scottish respectability. Their incarceration was most likely due to their political support of Alexander MacDonald. The

¹¹ C.S.S.R., i, 268-269, 271-272; *ibid.*, ii, 177-178, 188-190.

¹² Brown, *James I*, 95. Brown bases this suggestion on payments made by the king to his cousin; see *E.R.*, iv, 470, 500, 532.

¹³ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 258-261.

¹⁴ Major, *History*, 358.

¹⁵ *Chron. Ross*, 27.

Munros of Foulis were also contributors to the unrest in the north. On 24 August 1428 the Munro leaders were given letters of pardon by James I as well as other men of significance from Easter Ross for all crimes attributed to them.¹⁶ These letters should be interpreted as remission for these men's support of Alexander MacDonald, and indeed, Michael Brown suggests this in his study of James I.¹⁷

With the significant men of Ross earning the enmity of the king along with the lord of the Isles, it seems clear that Alexander MacDonald had been successful in expanding his influence over the earldom. This success would seem to have been undiminished by the royal actions of 1428, and upon gaining his freedom the lord of the Isles seems to have looked to the manpower of the earldom of Ross in equal measure to his domain in the Isles to exact his vengeance against the king. According to Bower, Alexander burnt the royal burgh of Inverness and gathered an army of ten thousand men from Ross and the Isles, but was defeated by the king's army in Lochaber in 1429 after being deserted by clans Chattan and Cameron. Alexander was imprisoned in Tantallon Castle in the custody of the earl of Angus, and his mother, Mary Leslie, was placed in Inchcolm.¹⁸ It may be an indication of the prominence of the Ross contingent that they took precedence in Bower's account, and when the clans MacKintosh and Cameron switched their allegiance from Alexander MacDonald to James I in 1429 there were no similar references to defections by the nobles of Ross. By 14 September 1431 the king was acting as earl of Ross when he granted the thanage of Cawdor to Donald of Cawdor.¹⁹ However, the contemporary chronicler, Walter Bower, acknowledges Mary's legitimacy as the countess of Ross.²⁰ This might indicate the Scottish community's sympathy for Alexander MacDonald and his mother; James I's activities as earl of Ross were not seen as acceptable.

As James I began exercising lordship over Ross, the king's lieutenant, the earl of Mar, planned further punitive measures against Clan Donald and its allies, coinciding with regional violence. In Strathnaver, Angus Murray attacked Angus Dubh MacKay, lord of Strathnaver, after they were both released from their imprisonment; Bower described this

¹⁶ *Munro Writs*, 5-6, no. 17.

¹⁷ Brown, *James I*, 97.

¹⁸ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 261-263.

¹⁹ *Cawdor Bk.*, 11-13.

²⁰ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 258-259, 262-263, 276-277. Presumably Bower would have known Mary personally, as he was her gaoler. This may have also influenced *Scotichronicon's* portrayals.

as a bloody stalemate with both sides obliterated.²¹ Further south, with Mar's authorisation, the MacKenzies were attacking the Mathesons.²² During the same period Mar gathered a royal army and invaded Lochaber, accompanied by the earl of Caithness, Camerons, Frasers, MacKintoshes and Grants.²³ This has led Michael Brown to identify the earl of Mar's plan as a three-pronged campaign which took advantage of local conflicts: the MacKenzies were to subdue the Mathesons; Angus Murray of Culbin was tasked with the destruction of Mackay power in Strathnaver; and the earl of Mar himself led the main pro-royal forces against the lord of the Isles' kinsmen, Alexander Carrach, in Lochaber.²⁴

It is difficult to discern if the loyalties of the noblemen of Ross had shifted to aid Mar. Many others who had been in royal imprisonment in 1428 or had deserted the lord of the Isles in 1429 had already joined the military efforts of Mar, as exemplified by the Camerons, MacKenzies, MacKintoshes and Angus Murray. Yet records regarding the clans which controlled the earldom of Ross, the Rosses of Balnagown and the Munros of Foulis, are silent. Certainly the northernmost of these three attacks would have gained the support of the lord of Balnagown if it presented an opportunity for the Rosses to gain back their lands in Ferincoskry from the MacKays who had received the grant from Donald of Harlaw in 1415.²⁵ Yet, if this was motive for Balnagown to join in Mar's efforts it would have been based on a tenuous supposition since Angus Murray, aided by his MacKay sons-in-law, Neill and Morgan MacKay, were themselves appropriating much of Ferincoskry at the expense of Angus Dubh MacKay, lord of Strathnaver and Thomas Neillson MacKay.²⁶ The mandate given to the chief of the MacKenzies to destroy the Mathesons might also have been supported by Hugh Ross, if indeed there had been a marital link between the two, but this link is questionable. However, the direct attack on Clan Donald by the earl of Mar in Lochaber, while the lord of the Isles languished already in Tantallon Castle, was a far less welcome development. It demonstrated the severity of the king's disposition towards Alexander MacDonald's adherents and this may have worried those in Ross who, though seemingly pardoned by the king, continued to be vulnerable as potential targets for royal wrath. Indeed, as James I had already signalled his own willingness to act as earl of Ross, he may have conceived that, with the destruction of Clan Donald at the hands of the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 265-267.

²² Matheson, 'Traditions of the Mathesons', 160-161; Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 472.

²³ *H.P.*, i, 39-40.

²⁴ Brown, *James I*, 136-137.

²⁵ *A.L.I.*, no. 19.

²⁶ *R.M.S.*, ii, nos. 147, 148, 149.

earl of Mar, royal authority would have complete sway over the earldom of Ross. It may even have been the king's intention to make the magnates of Ross royal vassals in a similar fashion to his actions in Moray. Michael Brown suggests that the death of James, earl of Moray, in August 1430 allowed the king to exercise his authority more readily through the incorporation of Moray vassals into royal clients.²⁷

Although the loyalties the lord of the Isles received from Ross in 1428 were demonstrated by the king's persecution of the Munros, William Leslie and Hugh Ross, their presence in 1431 in acts of the king may indicate their capitulation to the king's will and their subsequent absence from the activities of Donald Balloch in his successful resistance of royal forces led by Mar. Their allegiance seemed to have been limited either by royal success at pacifying Ross or through their unwillingness to follow any other leader besides Alexander himself. The leaders of Ross could have been unwilling to follow Donald Balloch or any other leader from Clan Donald: perhaps Alexander was perceived by these men as primarily the heir to the Leslies and Ross rather than as the lord of the Isles. Without his personal presence their resistance to the Crown evaporated. Indeed, the *Sleat History* may confirm this when it recounted that the vassals of the lord of the Isles had given up hope in his cause by the time of Mar's march towards Inverlochy and in order to maintain their own positions were eager to be seen as acceding to royal commands.²⁸ Therefore, the nobles in Ross who had previously allied themselves to the lord of the Isles were likely men attempting to keep low profiles in 1431 in the wake of the royal armies pushing westward to eliminate the remaining Clan Donald resistance, and may have been tentative supporters of the attack on the Strathnaver Mackays.

Royal triumphs in the north were abruptly halted when Donald Balloch defeated the earl of Mar at the battle of Inverlochy in September 1431.²⁹ This defeat and the strained political situation James I faced in parliament³⁰ halted any future plans of the king to exercise direct authority over Ross or for the magnates of Ross to waver further in their loyalties to the lord of the Isles. Shortly after Inverlochy James I released the lord of the Isles in front of parliament at Perth.³¹ After the victory of Inverlochy and the release of Alexander MacDonald from Tantallon there was a period in which his activities in Ross were

²⁷ Brown, *James I*, 136.

²⁸ *H.P.*, i, 40.

²⁹ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 265.

³⁰ Brown, *James I*, 139-140.

³¹ *Scotichronicon*, viii, 265.

obscured by the silence of sources. It has been accepted by Michael Brown that Inverlochy and the subsequent weak political position of the king provided the impetus for Alexander to secure his claim to Ross, but the king may still have prevaricated with Alexander's instalment as earl since it was not until 1437, after the death of James I,³² that Alexander began to appear as earl of Ross in charters. Even with royal recognition of MacDonald possession of Ross, the new earl quickly faced new challengers for dominance of the north from different quarters.

The Politics of Survival

On 8 January 1437 Earl Alexander was a recipient of a grant from one of his feudal vassals. Hugh Fraser, lord of Lovat gave to the earl his one-third portion of Glenelg.³³ The significance of this charter lay in the fact that the MacLeods of Dunvegan held the other two-thirds of Glenelg³⁴ and in his position as earl of Ross Alexander MacDonald could obtain the last portion of Glenelg because of the influence the earls of Ross had traditionally projected over the lords of the Aird for over a century. Perhaps this grant was a peace-offering by Fraser, a consequence of the Frasers being aligned against Alexander MacDonald in the military campaigns of 1429 and 1431.³⁵ Regardless, this grant by Fraser to the earl of Ross signalled the beginning of a high level of engagement which Earl Alexander was to have with the Aird, drawing the local lords of the region closer into the affairs of Ross. Equally important as the Aird for the earl was his ability to project his influence into the sheriffdom of Nairn, which stemmed from the old grant by Robert I to Hugh, earl of Ross in the fourteenth century. The day he received his grant of Glenelg from Fraser of Lovat Earl Alexander was in Inverness acting as lord of Nairn, where he was occupied with the bailie of Nairn, Donald, thane of Cawdor, in administrative affairs.³⁶ The earl was joined in Inverness by several nobles including George Munro and Alexander MacCulloch, as well as Torquil MacLeod of Lewis.³⁷ In exercising administrative authority in the Aird and Nairn, Earl Alexander was aided by receiving the title of justiciar north of the Forth, facilitating his ability to hold sway over the north. Brown suggests that it was Archibald, 5th earl of Douglas, in his capacity as lieutenant-general of Scotland, who

³² *Ibid.*, 300-303.

³³ *A.L.I.*, no. 24.

³⁴ *R.R.S.*, vi, no. 486.

³⁵ *H.P.*, i, 40; *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 179.

³⁶ *A.L.I.*, no. 25. Donald of Cawdor was labelled as bailie of Nairn in this document. In 1405 he had been made sheriff of Nairn by the Duke of Albany.

³⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 26; *Clan Donald*, i, 474-475; *Invenessiana*, 109.

granted the justiciarship to Earl Alexander in an effort to cultivate a relationship with Ross.³⁸

The first document in which Earl Alexander used the title of justiciar north of the Forth was dated 22 February 1439 at Dingwall. He confirmed a charter by John Lindsay to Sir Walter Innes of the barony of Aberchirder in the sheriffdom of Banff, and was attended by a representation of men from the earldom of Ross and the sheriffdom of Inverness: William of Cawdor, son of Thane Donald, William Urquhart, George Munro, Hugh Ross, William Leslie, who was now the sheriff of Inverness, and a 'Murchardus Revach'.³⁹ William Urquhart's appearance in this document may have indicated the earl's efforts to draw the Urquharts, who were the dominant force on the Black Isle and in controlling the sheriffdom of Cromarty, into his political camp. More importantly, since David II had granted the thanage of Aberchirder to Walter Leslie in 1370,⁴⁰ Earl Alexander could derive satisfaction from this confirmation as he was exercising authority over lands associated with an older Ross patrimony. In the process of exercising his authority as earl of Ross and justiciar he was overseeing lands associated with the Leslie/Lindsay affinity granted to the Inneses, a family which would become increasingly close to Clan Donald during the fifteenth century, surrounded by his most important vassals from the Ross. It was also possible that this event saw Earl Alexander take the opportunity to make political overtures to both the Leslies and the Lindsays. William Leslie's presence was of particular note since he had been an ally to Earl Alexander as early as the troubles with the king in 1428 and, as sheriff of Inverness, a working relationship would have been administratively beneficial in addition to the symbolic significance of a Leslie and MacDonald conciliation. Indeed, it may have been due to Earl Alexander's influence that William Leslie had received the office of sheriff.

The year 1440 saw Earl Alexander focus the bulk of his time beyond the earldom of Ross, involving himself in his duties as justiciar north of the Forth, and in building up and reinforcing his position in the Aird and the sheriffdom of Nairn. On 23 March the earl was in Balconie installing Walter Urquhart, parson of Kiltarn, in lands contained within the burgh of Cromarty,⁴¹ demonstrating continued engagement with the Urquharts and the

³⁸ Brown, *Black Douglasses*, 248.

³⁹ *A.L.I.*, no. 27; *Clan Donald*, i, 528-529. Murchardus Revach may have been a Mackenzie, see Matheson, 'Traditions of the MacKenzies', 210; *A.L.I.*, Appendix C, 261. If he was a Mackenzie then the witness list would seem to encompass representation from Wester Ross.

⁴⁰ *R.M.S.*, i, nos. 316, 339.

⁴¹ *A.L.I.*, no. 32.

sheriffdom of Cromarty. In July he was exercising his power over the sheriffdom of Nairn, granting Hugh Rose of Kilravock his inheritance of the barony of Kilravock.⁴² Earl Alexander further ordered Donald, thane of Cawdor and sheriff of Nairn, to give sasine to the said Hugh Rose.⁴³ These charters and precepts signified the earl's heavy engagement with the administrative regions historically linked to the Ross patronage: the sheriffdoms of Nairn, Cromarty and Banff and the barony of the Aird. The cultivation of Fraser of Lovat, Rose of Kilravock, the thane of Cawdor, Urquhart of Cromarty, Innes of Innes, and the Leslie sheriff of Inverness all could offer Earl Alexander vital support needed to balance his less than affable relationship with his sovereign.

These early interactions by the earl in regions east of Ross were a prelude to the major realignments of power in Scotland which accompanied the politics of the kingdom in the 1440s. As with the rest of the Scottish hierarchy, uppermost in the mind of the earl of Ross in late 1440 were the events occurring at the king's court, where the struggle between the Stewart monarchy and the powerful Black Douglasses was reaching new levels of brutality and which would cast a foreboding shadow of uncertainty within the political establishment. On 24 November 1440 the sixth earl of Douglas and his younger brother, David, were murdered after they had enjoyed dinner at the king's table in Edinburgh Castle.⁴⁴ How the events of the Black Dinner were viewed by the lords of Ross is difficult to determine. Certainly for Earl Alexander this savage display by James II and those in power at the young king's court may have conjured up images from Alexander's own past. The transgression caused by James II's own father against the earl of Ross in 1428-1430 bore striking similarities to the Black Dinner. Nor was he the only man in Ross to have bad memories of royal treachery. John Ross, who inherited his father's place as lord of Balnagown in January 1440,⁴⁵ would have remembered that his father had been one of the Highland chiefs lured to his imprisonment by James I. The situation was compounded by the fact that the new seventh earl of Douglas was known as a supporter of James I.⁴⁶ Despite efforts by early historians to depict the sixth earl of Douglas as a haughty, unbearable individual,⁴⁷ the earl of Ross and his vassals would have preferred the youthful

⁴² *Ibid.*, no. 34, no. 35, no. 35a.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, no. 36.

⁴⁴ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 171 (f. 121r-f.121v).

⁴⁵ *A.L.I.*, no. 31.

⁴⁶ Christine McGladdery, *James II*, 12-13.

⁴⁷ Pitscottie, *Historie*, i, 40. The inflation of sixteenth century accounts regarding the negative nature of the sixth earl of Douglas is noted in McGladdery, *James II*, 23.

and untested sixth earl of Douglas, who could have been a possible check to James I, to one known for his rapacious appetite for land acquisition and an affiliation with a king unfriendly to the Clan Donald.

Any unpleasant memories the Black Dinner may have invoked in the mind of Earl Alexander and the lords of Ross were subordinate to the practical worries of what the sudden change in Douglas leadership meant for the territories adjacent to the earldom of Ross. The barony of Avoch had been a possession of the Black Douglasses since the fourth earl of Douglas, Archibald the Grim, had inherited it through marriage with the Murray heiress in 1362.⁴⁸ This Douglas presence so near the heartland of the Ross earldom necessitated careful monitoring, as the borders of Ross were facing inevitable change in the wake of the Black Dinner. If the murder of the sixth earl of Douglas and his brother did not fill the lords of Ross with apprehension, then the promotion of the younger brothers of William, eighth earl of Douglas, to the highest echelon of Scottish society most certainly would have. By June 1445 Archibald Douglas was acknowledged as the earl of Moray and Hugh Douglas had a brand new earldom created for him centred on the Black Isle, in Ardmeanach, Avoch and Redcastle, known as the earldom of Ormond.⁴⁹ The elevation of the Douglas brothers in northern comital titles may have held little practical worth at first. Brown suggests that the earl of Ross remained the real power in Ormond and Moray in the 1440s.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the northern Douglas earldoms represented the impending intentions by the Douglasses to alter the balance of northern power in their favour.

Douglas control of Moray presented a potential challenge to MacDonald influence in the north, but the establishment of the earldom of Ormond altered the regional status quo on the eastern border of Ross and was a far more intrusive threat to the integrity of the domain ruled by Alexander MacDonald. As the new earldom constituted the bulk of the Black Isle, much of it was comprised of lands within the diocese of Ross, and the new Douglas earl of Ormond was in closer proximity to the diocesan seat at Rosemarkie than the earl of Ross, a potentially critical factor in dealings with the bishop. In addition, Ormond's seat of power was the strategically important and symbolic stronghold of Redcastle on the Beaully Firth. Not only did Redcastle have the strategic ability to cut Ross off from a main land route to the rest of Scotland but, since Redcastle had been built by King William in the twelfth

⁴⁸ Brown, *Black Douglasses*, 56-57, 267.

⁴⁹ *R.P.S.*, A1445/10. Date accessed: 12 November 2014.

⁵⁰ Michael Brown, 'The Great Rupture: Lordship and Politics in North-East Scotland (1435-1452)' *Northern Scotland*, 5 (2014), 1-25, 14.

century to protect Scotland from the MacWilliams,⁵¹ there was the historical precedent of using Redcastle as a point of containing the Scottish king's enemies. The barony of Avoch also had significance in earlier times. In the 1290s, despite being considered a part of Ross, Avoch was a source of consternation for the countess of Ross when it was controlled by Andrew Murray and used as a mustering point in his rebellion.⁵² Therefore, Ormond posed a direct challenge to the earl of Ross and it is unlikely that Earl Alexander would have been unaware of the significance of the Black Isle's strategic and historic value.

The temperament of the new earl of Ormond was also cause for the earl of Ross to worry; Hugh Douglas was a warlike man best known in the 1440s for his victory at Lochmaben against the English in 1448.⁵³ An aggressive military type, who was brother to the most powerful lord in Scotland, was the last thing the earl of Ross needed on his eastern flank. The creation of the earldom of Ormond may also have presented a symbolic challenge to the earl of Ross of a cultural nature; as suggested by Michael Brown, this creation was an insult to the earl of Ross because of the irony that the title of Ormond was used in Ireland to rebuff native Irish ambition. This in turn gave Hugh Douglas's new position undertones of being the defender of non-Gaelic Scotland in the face of MacDonald Gaelicism.⁵⁴ If Brown's theory is accurate then perhaps the king and the Douglasses envisioned Ormond serving a similar purpose to that of the Badenoch Stewarts a generation earlier: to have an asset capable of containing the Highlands and MacDonald expansion. The symbolic power of Ormond was complemented by the status he had within his own kindred. The role of Hugh Douglas within the Douglas hierarchy as second only to the earl of Douglas was made apparent when the earl of Douglas went to Rome in 1450-1451 and Hugh was guardian of Douglas holdings in his absence.⁵⁵

In the aftermath of the Black Dinner the earl of Ross redoubled his efforts to construct a network of allies that could act as a buffer from threats posed by the new line of Douglas earls, the earl of Crawford, or the king. The lords in the Aird were, once again, the most important component of this network. One of the more important of these efforts was that to bind the lord of Lovat to Ross. In this the earl of Ross was successful. On 18 January

⁵¹ *Chron. Melrose*, 42, 46; English translation can be found in *E.S.*, ii, 301-302, 312-313; *Scotichronicon*, iv, 336-337.

⁵² See above, 51-53.

⁵³ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 163-164 (f. 113r).

⁵⁴ Brown, *Black Douglasses*, 269-270.

⁵⁵ McGladdery, *James II*, 55-56.

1442 Thomas Fraser, lord of Lovat, gave a bond of manrent to Earl Alexander in a document that was dominated by the lords of Easter Ross in the witness list: Ross of Balnagown, Munro of Foulis and MacCulloch of Plaids.⁵⁶ Alexander Grant has observed that the use of the bonds of manrent by the MacDonald lords throughout the fifteenth century notably lacked the traditional clause excluding the king from the list of those against whom the subject of the manrent was potentially obligated to serve.⁵⁷ However, this bond made specific mention of Fraser's allegiance to the king and the current earl of Moray and their exemption from the bond. Clearly Fraser was unwilling to place himself in the middle of potential Ross/Crown conflict. Brown suggests that the earl of Ross may have forced Fraser into this agreement as part of a larger aggressive campaign to assert MacDonald influence in the region.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the bond did represent an increase in dialogue with one of the more powerful men in the Aird. Undoubtedly Earl Alexander hoped to pull Fraser away from the influence of the Douglasses and to bring him closer into his own sphere of authority. The reasons for this formal alliance were likely tied to the uncertainties which came with the violent regime change within the Black Douglas family in 1440. The regional ambitions of the new seventh and eighth earls of Douglas in the north meant it was good policy for Ross and Lovat to increase their mutual ties given their proximity to the Douglas lands in the north, particularly the Douglas barony of Avoch. The appearance of the lords of Balnagown, Foulis and Plaids as witnesses could have meant that all the premier lords of the earldom of Ross were involved in formulating this bond of manrent; the lords of Ross sought security and a balance to Douglas power on their south-eastern border as much as Earl Alexander did. The witness list also suggests Alexander's role as earl of Ross was the primary concern for the parties involved.

The Fraser bond was followed by another transaction with a noble on Earl Alexander's eastern flank. Donald, thane of Cawdor, died and with this death the earl had an obligation to reiterate his own feudal rights over Cawdor. On 17 August 1442 Earl Alexander ordered his depute sheriff of Inverness, John Grant, to give sasine to the new thane of Cawdor, William of Cawdor, of his inheritance which included the thanage of Cawdor, the sheriffdom of Nairn and lands in the earldom of Moray which included Balmakeith, Boath, Banchor and half the land of Rait.⁵⁹ This was of particular note since the deceased Donald had been installed in his offices in Cawdor and Nairn by the Duke of Albany in 1405, a

⁵⁶ *A.L.I.*, no. 37.

⁵⁷ Grant, 'Celtic Fringe', 131.

⁵⁸ Brown, 'The Great Rupture', 9.

⁵⁹ *A.L.I.*, no. 38.

link which could have been something of a political thorn for the MacDonald earl of Ross. Earl Alexander could have utilised the formal process of installing the new thane into the hereditary offices and lands associated with Cawdor to draw him under MacDonald patronage. Securing the loyalty of the new thane was perhaps more pertinent for MacDonald interests than the bond with the Frasers since Cawdor controlled the sheriffdom of Nairn, a sheriffdom which had enjoyed a relationship with the earls of Ross since the reign of Robert Bruce, and which was a means through which the earls of Ross had projected influence into Moray.

As the earl of Ross and his allies watched intently what actions the new Douglas lords were taking, other confrontations were drawing Ross closer towards conflict with another regional power. By the 1440s David Lindsay, earl of Crawford, was feuding with Walter Ogilvie of Inverquharie over who controlled the resources of Arbroath abbey.⁶⁰ The troubles between Lindsay and Ogilvie culminated in the battle of Arbroath in 1446, which saw the defeat of a Seton/Ogilvie army but the death of Crawford.⁶¹ This quarrel was most certainly watched closely by the earl of Ross since Earl Alexander was highly engaged with the Ogilvie family in the 1440s. MacDonald interaction with the Ogilvies previously had not been genial. The Ogilvies were known as having joined the earl of Mar at the battle of Harlaw in 1411 against the MacDonalds.⁶² Yet, Ogilvie acquisitions in Buchan and in the barony of the Aird had altered the political situation, allowing for a measure of dialogue between Earl Alexander and the Ogilvies. To the east, in the old Ross patrimony of Buchan, the barony of Deskford had been obtained by the Walter Ogilvie on 11 August 1440.⁶³ More importantly, the Fenton lords of Beaufort had died out by 10 March 1438 and that portion of the Aird had been inherited by another Walter Ogilvie, who had married the heiress of Walter Fenton, lord of Beaufort, which thereby made him lord of Beaufort and a local power in the barony of the Aird.⁶⁴ As with so many earls of Ross before him, Earl Alexander desired to cultivate good ties with the noble families of that barony. The desirability of a MacDonald/Ogilvie alliance was perhaps fuelled further by the similar political circumstances of both Earl Alexander and Walter Ogilvie in that they were both relatively 'new men' in large portions of the territory in which they exercised lordship;

⁶⁰ McGladdery, *James II*, 37.

⁶¹ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 162 (f. 111v).

⁶² *Scotichronicon*, viii, 74-75.

⁶³ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 245.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, nos. 219-221.

Walter Ogilvie was the first of his name to join the ranks of the ruling families of the Aird just as Alexander was the first MacDonald earl of Ross.

Initial interactions between the earl of Ross and the Ogilvies were concerned with affairs in the Aird and involved Ogilvie of Deskford. Sir Walter Ogilvie of Deskford was a witness in July 1440 to Earl Alexander's grant of the Kilravock inheritance to Hugh Rose while the earl was in Inverness.⁶⁵ However, mutual self-interest drove the earl of Ross and the lord of Beaufort into a closer arrangement. When Alexander MacDonald was made earl of Ross he inherited the barony of Kincardine, which had become a part of the Ross patrimony in 1370 when Walter Leslie, lord of Ross was granted three thanages in the sheriffdom of Kincardine by David II: Kincardine, Arbuthnott and Fettercairn.⁶⁶ By the time Alexander MacDonald became earl of Ross the barony of Kincardine presented an administrative dilemma. Geographically detached from Ross and linked to the Leslies, Kincardine was too far away to control directly and was in uncomfortable proximity to royal authority in the Mearns. Earl Alexander needed to insert others to exercise practical lordship in Kincardine if he hoped to avoid unwanted complications. The new Ogilvie lord of Beaufort and his kinsmen provided the earl of Ross with just such individuals as did Sir John Scrymgeour, constable of Dundee. On 24 October 1443 the earl of Ross granted the lands of Thaneston within the sheriffdom of Kincardine to Walter Ogilvie, lord of Beaufort.⁶⁷ On 10 October 1444 Scrymgeour was granted large portions of land in the sheriffdom of Kincardine, including Kincardine Castle.⁶⁸ On the same day Alexander Ogilvie of Inverquhar, rival of Alexander Lindsay for control of Arbroath abbey, was acting in an administrative capacity as bailie of the earl of Ross in his barony of Kincardine.⁶⁹

Ogilvie administration in the barony of Kincardine was successful. That the monks of Arbroath preferred Alexander Ogilvie of Inverquhar to act on their financial behalf rather than Alexander Lindsay, and were willing to provoke the earl of Crawford in their choice, demonstrated a preference for Ogilvie supervision in the region. Unfortunately for the earl of Ross, the Lindsay/Ogilvie feud over Arbroath abbey threatened his administrative arrangement in Kincardine. The earl of Crawford's fight against the Ogilvies in 1446 would not have been appreciated by the earl of Ross. However, as long as

⁶⁵ *A.L.I.*, nos. 35, 35a.

⁶⁶ *R.M.S.*, i, nos. 316, 338.

⁶⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 43.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 44.

Crawford was closely in league with the earl of Douglas, the earl of Ross was probably apprehensive about openly joining the Ogilvies in a quarrel which had no direct bearing on Ross business. While explicit support for the Ogilvies was prevented by political impracticalities, Earl Alexander might have played a tacit role by encouraging another recipient of Ross patronage, Alexander Seton, lord of Gordon and earl of Huntly, to throw his weight behind the Ogilvies. One year before the earl of Ross had granted Ogilvie rights in Kincardine, the earl had made a similar gesture to Seton, at the time still only lord of Gordon. On 5 October 1442 Earl Alexander granted the liferent of his barony of Kingedward to Alexander Seton.⁷⁰ This gave the lord of Gordon the income of the last remnants of the Ross earls' patrimony in the earldom of Buchan. In conjunction with the Kincardine grants this effectively removed all detached Ross patrimony lands from direct Ross authority. The earl of Ross was systematically using his vulnerable easternmost lands to draw in new allies and attempt to create stability in the Ross patrimony furthest from MacDonald influence. Consequently, through the earl of Ross both the Ogilvies and the earl of Huntly were tied into a landowning arrangement and when the Ogilvies were threatened, the others were affected. It was recorded in the *Auchinleck Chronicle* that the earl of Huntly joined the Ogilvie forces at the battle of Arbroath.⁷¹ Huntly's presence has been dismissed by Christine MacGladdery as a coincidence; he was a house guest who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.⁷² But the relationships built by the earl of Ross with both Alexander Seton and the Ogilvies imply a more involved state of affairs. The possibility that these three had their own accord prior to the earl of Ross joining the later Crawford/Douglas axis cannot be discounted. Indeed, Michael Brown suggests that, since Gordon was a royal councillor, the earl of Ross used his alliance with the Ogilvies and Gordons as a conduit to the royal council, particularly Gordon's ally Chancellor Crichton.⁷³

Knowledge of a bond created by the earls of Crawford, Douglas and Ross is based on a note regarding the bond which dated the accord 7 March 1445.⁷⁴ This date was tentatively accepted as accurate by Donald Gregory and more recently by Alexander Grant, while Jean and R.W. Munro suggested the date should be modified to fit modern dating making it March 1446.⁷⁵ Tensions with the Douglasses had been considerable in the period preceding

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 39.

⁷¹ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 162, (f. 111v).

⁷² MacGladdery, *James II*, 37.

⁷³ Brown, 'The Great Rupture', 11-12.

⁷⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 45.

⁷⁵ Gregory, *History*, 40 (footnote); Grant, 'Revolt', 172 (footnote no. 8); *A.L.I.*, Comment to no. 45.

this date. For the earl of Ross the bond was as much a tool to prevent further build-up of ill will between himself and the Douglas/Crawford axis as it was an anti-government hedge. It would also have fitted Earl Alexander's political pattern in the 1440s of trying to cultivate allies. If the earl of Ross had indeed entered into an alliance with Douglas and Crawford as early as 1445/1446, then the conflict between Crawford and Ogilvie in 1446 would have placed even more strain on the triumvirate and the earlier alliances made with the Ogilvies and Huntly. Taken further, the bond could have been a significant factor in Earl Alexander's lack of direct involvement in supporting his Ogilvie/Huntly allies in their feud with Crawford. Brown suggests that the earl of Ross was willing to enter into a bond of friendship with the earls Crawford and Douglas in order to secure the goodwill of his new Douglas neighbours and to maintain his link with the royal council where Gordon had lost influence after the battle of Arbroath as Douglas and Livingston influence grew.⁷⁶ If so, the basis for the later MacDonald/Huntly hostilities that Alison Cathcart suggested began in 1451⁷⁷ might be placed into better context. However, Christine McGladdery has argued that it is more likely that 1452 was the correct date of this bond because by then there were more pressing reasons for such an accord, there were new earls of Crawford and Ross and the source for the note of the bond was unreliable.⁷⁸ Norman Macdougall also suggests there is merit in the 1452 date since the earl of Douglas needed a safe-conduct to visit the king in February of that year.⁷⁹ Since the date of this bond remains a point of debate between historians, it will be revisited when discussing the lordship of John MacDonald in the next chapter, and the consequences of a 1452 context will be considered.

One other family which appeared often in the witness lists of MacDonald documents in the 1440s was the Chisholms who, like their Aird predecessors, had lost the Erchless portion of the Aird through the failure of the male line by 1432.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the Chisholms continued to play an influential role in the politics of the Aird and in the retinue of the earl of Ross. This was apparent in their involvement in Earl Alexander's attempts in the 1440s to cultivate a large base of adherents. Robert Chisholm featured as a witness in documents to Hugh Rose in 1440, while 'Wiland' Chisholm appeared as a witness in 1443 and 1444 in the charters to Walter Ogilvie and Malcolm Mackintosh respectively and in the latter

⁷⁶ Brown, 'The Great Rupture', 15-17.

⁷⁷ Alison Cathcart, *Kinship and Clientage: Highland Clanship 1451-1609* (Leiden, 2006), 41.

⁷⁸ McGladdery, *James II*, 63.

⁷⁹ MacDougall, 'Achilles' Heel?', 253-254.

⁸⁰ *Beaully Chrs.*, 98-99.

document was labelled as one of Alexander's councillors.⁸¹ It has been argued in the previous chapter that the Chisholms functioned as allies to the lordship of the Isles.⁸² This seems to have continued when Alexander MacDonald was earl of Ross. Wiland Chisholm's status as councillor was of particular note since he and Munro of Foulis were the only two men not of the lordship of the Isles to have those titles, and Chisholm was the sole representative in this elite group from the Aird. This is telling as it indicates the Chisholms had secured themselves as facilitators of MacDonald interests in the Aird, Badenoch and Moray. Batten suggested that there was a sense of political continuity between Alexander of Lochaber's conflict with the bishop of Moray over Kinmylies in 1398 and Earl Alexander's presence there in 1440, which indicated MacDonald success at maintaining control over the area despite the bishop of Moray's opposition.⁸³ If accurate, this continuity was most likely achieved by the efforts of the Chisholms who had been the recipients of Alexander of Lochaber's Kinmylies grant and who clearly played important roles in Earl Alexander's administration.

Another regional figure the earl of Ross was engaging with was Malcolm Mackintosh. On 11 February 1444, while in Inverness, the earl granted to Mackintosh significant lands within Lochaber.⁸⁴ This grant was important in the eyes of both the earl and his vassals as the proceedings included Alexander's council. It might be beneficial to pause a moment and examine this council. It consisted of George Munro, lord of Foulis, Wiland Chisholm and a list of notables from the lordship of the Isles: MacLean of Duart, MacLean of Lochbuie, MacLean of Coll and Neil MacLeod.⁸⁵ It seems quite possible that the council mentioned in this document was a council of the MacDonald hegemony which encompassed a far larger remit than just the lordship of the Isles or the earldom of Ross, but rather, was supposed to represent the cumulative tally of regions the MacDonalds controlled or dominated with their influence: a council of MacDonald's sphere of influence not bound by physical territorial borders. This interpretation would explain the presence of Wiland Chisholm as a councillor as he conceivably represented the interests of the Aird with perhaps responsibilities that extended to Badenoch and the sheriffdom of Nairn, while Munro of Foulis, already seen as Earl Alexander's well-utilised bailie, represented Ross. If

⁸¹ *A.L.I.*, nos. 35, 35a, 40, 42. Wiland Chisholm's core territory may have been in Strathglass as he appears as 'of Comar' in 1499, see *Family of Rose*, 169.

⁸² See above, 119.

⁸³ Batten, *Charters of the Priory of Beaulieu*, 97.

⁸⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 42.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

this theory is accurate then the Aird functioned as a defined region perceived as MacDonald territory.

The gravity of the 1444 Mackintosh grant was not only due to the importance of Lochaber. This grant was curious since Mackintosh was not the most reliable ally to whom to hand Lochaber. He had demonstrated his lack of loyalty to Alexander previously in 1429 when he betrayed his MacDonald lord and joined the king's forces. Arguably this action caused Alexander the humiliation of submitting to the king and his subsequent imprisonment. Yet the practical politics of the 1440s necessitated trying to draw Mackintosh back into the fold. Mackintosh was key to controlling Badenoch and held the position of bailie of Badenoch in 1440.⁸⁶ The 1444 grant was followed by another act of patronage to Malcolm Mackintosh when on 13 November 1447 Earl Alexander made him bailie over all Lochaber.⁸⁷ It is significant to note that although this charter was witnessed at Dingwall, the witness list was filled solely with men associated with the lordship of the Isles; Lochaber affairs were not the province of the nobles of Ross. The absence of Ross nobles from this proceeding was especially curious considering that three years earlier, when Mackintosh was granted large swathes of Lochaber, both the Munro lord of Foulis and a member of the Aird Chisholms were present.⁸⁸ As with both Ogilvie and Seton lords, the earl of Ross gained influence over Mackintosh through granting him possession and standing within the MacDonald patrimony. The earl of Ross seemed to have been willing to forgive old betrayals in order to expand his reach beyond the Aird and provide yet another ally that might prove useful in containing expansionary threats of those lords the earl competed with for regional supremacy.

During his tenure as earl of Ross, Alexander MacDonald made concerted attempts to increase his relationships with the lords in the Aird. He entered into a bond of manrent with Fraser of Lovat, oversaw the instalment of a new Rose lord of Kilravock, used Ogilvie of Beaufort to administer the earl's barony of Kincardine and maintained his ties with the thanes of Cawdor which secured the sheriffdom of Nairn. Additionally, families like the Strathglass Chisholms seemed to have functioned as the earl's administrative agents over much of the territory of these lords. At the very least, these activities indicate that Earl Alexander was cementing his position as the first MacDonald earl of Ross and most likely was attempting to secure a network of alliances on his earldom's southern and

⁸⁶ *Family of Rose*, 131.

⁸⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 47.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 42.

eastern borders in response to the change in Black Douglas leadership following the Black Dinner and the subsequent expansion of Douglas power in the north. This might explain the preoccupation Earl Alexander had with matters outside the lordship of the Isles in this period. Ross was potentially vulnerable as the Douglasses created the earldom of Ormond and obtained the earldom of Moray. The 1440s then should be viewed as a period of consolidation in Ross which also functioned to contain Douglas activity. By the time the Douglas brothers were installed as earls of Ormond and Moray, the earl of Ross could hope to rely on a string of alliances on his eastern flank, some of which were with tenants of Douglas lands. The extent to which the earl of Ross's actions were concerned with his Douglas counterparts does seem to be significant, and it is curious that just as the brothers of the earl of Douglas were becoming northern earls in their own right, Earl Alexander was taking steps to secure his own progeny. In June 1445, Earl Alexander supplicated the pope to legitimise three of his illegitimate sons: Hugh, Alexander and Donald.⁸⁹

Diplomatic Ties and Administration within the Earldom

The 1415 grant of Ferincoskry and Strath Halladale made by Donald, lord of the Isles, to Angus Dubh Mackay and his son Neil⁹⁰ was the catalyst for the largest feud in fifteenth-century Ross: between the Mackays of Strathnaver and the Ross lords of Balnagown. The legality of the lord of the Isle's 1415 Ferincoskry grant should be suspect. While Alexander MacDonald was languishing in his imprisonment from 1429 through 1431 James I recognised the importance of the region and took the matter of land ownership in Ferincoskry into his own hands. In 1430 he granted the lands of the deceased Thomas Neilson of Creich in three charters to the brothers, Neil and Morgan MacKay, and to Angus Murray.⁹¹ Angus Mackay in his *Book of Mackay* notes that these royal charters seem to ignore the earlier 1415 grant by the lord of the Isles.⁹²

Angus Mackay mistakenly believed that the lords of Balnagown initially acquired an interest in Ferincoskry in 1430 when various factions were scrambling to acquire the lands of Thomas Neilson Mackay of Creich, in particular lands in Eddertoun and Kincardine;⁹³

⁸⁹ C.S.S.R., iv, no. 1222.

⁹⁰ A.L.I., no. 19; Angus Mackay, *The Book of Mackay* (Edinburgh, 1906), 375-376; see above, 132-134.

⁹¹ R.M.S., ii, nos. 147, 148, 149.

⁹² Mackay, *Book of Mackay*, 58.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 68.

but clearly the Ross lords of Balnagown held hereditary lands in these regions far earlier as seen by fourteenth-century charters. This mistake by the twentieth-century author underlines the confusion that Donald MacDonald's 1415 charter truly created, as well as the violence it incurred in the fifteenth century. The first violence noted between these two kindreds was in 1438, when Angus Mackay, grandson of the Angus Dubh who received Ferincoskry from the lord of the Isles, invaded Ross after his successful pillaging in Sutherland. The men of Ross resisted and defeated Mackay, whereupon Mackay fled for sanctuary in the church of Tarbat but was instead burnt alive by the victorious men of Ross.⁹⁴ According to the *Wardlaw MS* the monks at Fearn sought to prevent Angus Mackay from penetrating further into Ross by threatening interdiction.⁹⁵ The length of time which lapsed between the 1415 grant and the violence of 1438 could be explained by the preoccupation of the Mackays in their quarrels with Sutherland and Caithness families and the seven years of imprisonment suffered by Neil Mackay.⁹⁶

Although Earl Alexander had exercised some sort of authority in Ross during the 1420s and early 1430s, cultivating the support of the local kindreds, the first charter issued by him as earl of Ross was dated 6 January 1437 in Dingwall. This charter granted to Alexander MacCulloch the office of bailie of the immunity of Tain as well as numerous lands which included Plaids as its central base of authority, from which Alexander MacCulloch and his heirs would hereafter be known as the MacCullochs of Plaids.⁹⁷ The balanced geographic representation of the witnesses in the charter was to become a trademark of MacDonald lordship in Ross. The witness list consisted of the two leading men of Ross, Hugh Ross, lord of Balnagown, and George Munro, lord of Foulis, Donald,thane of Cawdor, and a vassal from the lordship of the Isles, John MacLeod, who, although not designated as such in this document, was probably the lord of Dunvegan.⁹⁸ This was a significant charter in that it could have either confirmed or signalled the rise of the MacCullochs as a great family in Ross which would rival the lords of Balnagown and the lords of Foulis for dominance over Ross affairs. This establishment of a third local power within Ross seems to have been at the instigation of Alexander MacDonald, the new earl. The motivation behind elevating a new family was probably to lessen his reliance on

⁹⁴ *Wardlaw*, 103-104.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100-103. Alternatively, William Matheson suggests the Mackays' real focus was on their feud with the Mathesons in Lochalsh after the battle of Drumnacoub (which Matheson dates to 1431), not Clan Ross and Ferincoskry, see Matheson, 'Traditions of the Mathesons', 157-159.

⁹⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 23.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Balnagown in the administration of the north of the earldom. Given that Tain is one possible location suggested as the place of Farquhar MacTaggart's origins, the grant to Alexander MacCulloch as bailie of the immunity of Tain might have further removed the lords of Balnagown from their symbolic seats of power.

No more telling of the rising fortunes of MacCulloch at the expense of Clan Ross were the marriages of the neighbouring Munro lord of Foulis, the other major magnate in Easter Ross. According to the Munro genealogy, George Munro married the daughter of the lord of Balnagown as his first wife, but he was quick to cultivate MacCulloch in that lord's new position and, after his first wife died, he married MacCulloch's daughter.⁹⁹ Although the date of George Munro's marriage to MacCulloch's daughter is unknown, clan historians suggest that Munro's first wife was Isobel, daughter of the Alexander Ross who died in battle in 1487, while the second wife was the daughter of John MacCulloch, who assumed the lordship of Plaids on 10 November 1450.¹⁰⁰ But George Munro was dead by 1452x1453¹⁰¹ along with his son(s) by Balnagown's daughter.¹⁰² His heir by MacCulloch's daughter, John, was granted sasine of Munro lands on 4 August 1453.¹⁰³ This would indicate George Munro's second marriage occurred sometime during the 1430s and therefore Munro's MacCulloch wife was likely the daughter of Alexander MacCulloch. Munro's Ross wife was probably the daughter of Hugh Ross who was lord of Balnagown until 1440 or a young daughter of John Ross, the son of Hugh.¹⁰⁴ This marriage was significant as George Munro was the right hand man of Earl Alexander in administration both within and outwith the earldom of Ross. It seems highly likely that the MacCulloch/Munro marriage was a result of the political fortunes of the MacCullochs which were on the rise through the 1430s and 1440s as a dominant force in the northeast of the earldom. It is unclear how the Rosses of Balnagown responded to the MacCullochs. Since there is no evidence of feuding between the two clans it might be assumed the MacCullochs had achieved their position peacefully. The Rosses of Balnagown may have

⁹⁹ *Munro Tree*, 9, M.

¹⁰⁰ MacKenzie, *History of the Munros of Fowlis*, 21; Ross, *History of the Clan Ross*, 25; *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 40; *A.L.I.*, no. 55.

¹⁰¹ *Munro Tree*, 9, M; *A.L.I.*, no. 56.

¹⁰² *Munro Tree*, 9, M; Gordon, *Sutherland*, 36; Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 470-471.

¹⁰³ *A.L.I.*, no. 67. An untitled John Munro was present in a 1450 retour, see *A.L.I.*, no. 55, and it is possible that this may have been George Munro's son, which would infer an even earlier date for George Munro's marriage to the daughter of MacCulloch. However, since clan sources agree that George Munro's adult sons died with him in battle, it is possible that the John Munro in the 1450 charter was a different individual.

¹⁰⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 31.

even welcomed the MacCullochs in their role as the earl's agents as it seems plausible the MacCullochs had functioned in northeast Ross as allies to the lords of Balnagown prior to the MacDonald era in Ross.

By the spring of 1439 Earl Alexander was ready to deal further with matters regarding the northern heartland of the old earldom of Ross. On 20 April he was in Tain and involved in the most high profile event of his tenure as earl: the inquest into the rights and privileges of the immunity of Tain.¹⁰⁵ This inquest brought together the largest group of men associated with Alexander's lordship outwith the lordship of the isles. The premier nobles of Ross were all present: Hugh Ross, lord of Balnagown, George Munro, lord of Foulis and Alexander MacCulloch. Alexander MacCulloch was accompanied by his kinsman George MacCulloch; the larger MacCulloch contingent probably was a reflection of their importance in Tain affairs. This inquest also involved prominent nobles from central Ross, such as Donald MacTyre. What stands out is the complete absence of the important lords from the lordship of the Isles at this inquest, despite their appearance at many of Alexander's other activities within Ross and other areas falling under Alexander's jurisdiction as justiciar north of the Forth. Although the proceedings lacked men from the isles, they did not rest solely with men from Ross either. The lords of Sutherland were present, including Alexander's brother-in-law, Alexander Sutherland, as well as men to the south of Ross such as William, thane of Cawdor, and William Leslie, the sheriff of Inverness. For Earl Alexander, the inspection of Tain's rights brought an administrative matter into an ideal setting for facilitating his political ties with his vassals. For the MacCullochs, this inquest also allowed them to demonstrate that the earl's faith in their abilities was not misplaced. The relative success of the MacCulloch administration of northern Ross might be seen in the lack of the higher authority coming often to Tain. The MacDonald earls of Ross were content to rely on MacCulloch administration of Tain. As the Tain burgh survey noted, only two documents by these earls were produced in Tain, indicating the lack of personal presence of the earls.¹⁰⁶

Matters for the earl's consideration in the north were not confined to Tain in that year. On 24 October 1439 Earl Alexander issued a document which guaranteed to protect his brother-in-law, Alexander Sutherland, and his sister, Mary, in their lands of Dunbeath and Reay in Sutherland, and provided insurance in case of the loss of these holdings with

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 28.

¹⁰⁶ *Historic Tain*, 28.

equivalent lands between the bridge of Alness and the girth of Tain, all within the earldom of Ross. Witnesses included individuals from the Lordship of the Isles such as MacLean of Duart and MacLeod of Dunvegan, but also included Alexander MacCulloch.¹⁰⁷ This was followed by another document dated the same day which ordered Dunbeath's kinsmen, Alexander Sutherland of Duffus and John Sutherland of Golspie, and the coroner of Caithness to give sasine of Dunbeath and Reay to Alexander of Dunbeath and Mary.¹⁰⁸ This document may have been formulaic, or perhaps Alexander of Dunbeath was in a tenuous situation in Sutherland; it is unclear why he may have needed an obligation of protection from the earl of Ross. The previous landowners of Dunbeath and Reay were the Rosses of Kinfauns. Hugh Ross of Kinfauns had received them from Walter Leslie, lord of Ross in 1380 and, although these properties had been handed over to John Dunbar, earl of Moray in 1387, they had been in the hands of Robert Ross, son and heir of the deceased Hugh, on 2 May 1427 after he received a retour of his father's lands in Caithness which involved William Sutherland, son of John Sutherland, and Robert Sutherland as two of the members of the inquest.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, it is conceivable that the grant of Dunbeath and Reay by Earl Alexander to Alexander Sutherland and Mary was connected in some way with limiting the influence of the Rosses of Balnagown through targeting lands associated with an extended branch of that clan and granting them to the earl's sister and her husband. If so, placing Alexander Sutherland and Mary of the Isles in charge of Ross patrimony in Sutherland with the promise of possible lands in the earldom of Ross was consistent with how the earl placed the MacCullochs in charge of northeast Ross. The response of the Balnagown Rosses to Earl Alexander's grant to Alexander Sutherland is unknown. Despite the tense relationship Hugh Ross may have had with the earl, the Sutherlands were important to the lords of Balnagown. According to the Ross chronicle, Hugh Ross, lord of Balnagown, married Janet, daughter of the earl of Sutherland, and his grandson, Alexander Ross, married Dorothy Sutherland.¹¹⁰ What is clear is that Earl Alexander was willing to provide his brother-in-law with alternative land holdings which were adjacent to the estates of the Munros of Foulis, the MacCullochs of Plaids and the Rosses of Balnagown, altering the political landscape of the earldom as a result. If the clause had been acted upon, Alexander of Dunbeath would have exercised lordship over a significant portion of the

¹⁰⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 29.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 30. Note, the editors of *A.L.I.* altered the year of this document to 1439, a correction to the eighteenth century transcript which incorrectly stated the year as 1429, see *A.L.I.*, no. 30 Comment.

¹⁰⁹ NRS GD 297/229.

¹¹⁰ *Chron. Ross*, 27. Unfortunately, these are undated marriages and are not confirmed by other sources.

heartland of the old earldom of Ross. This also reveals that Earl Alexander had direct possession of the land described in the document as between the bridge of Alness and the girth of Tain, a partial insight into which lands were directly held by the earl in Easter Ross.

Hugh Ross, lord of Balnagown, was dead by the beginning of 1440.¹¹¹ He was one of the original supporters in Ross of the MacDonald claims to the earldom but also an individual who had reason to challenge some of the decisions made by both Earl Alexander and his father, particularly the issue of ownership of Ferincoskry. In a document dated 21 January 1440, Earl Alexander ordered George Munro and Alexander MacCulloch to give sasine to John Ross, the new lord of Balnagown following Hugh's death.¹¹² This document defines the lands that the lord of Balnagown held after the Ross kindred lost title to the earldom. The lord of Balnagown held seventeen identifiable estates and remained a dominant landholder within Ross despite the loss of Ferincoskry. In this grant once again Earl Alexander demonstrated an administrative reliance on the MacCullochs and the Munros to implement his will. The death of Hugh Ross and the installation of an untested John Ross as head of Clan Ross may have given Earl Alexander the confidence to press into the affairs traditionally associated with the lords of Balnagown. While in Dingwall in 1446 Earl Alexander dealt with a matter inherent to the earldom of Ross, and symbolically important to the Rosses of Balnagown. He authorised George Munro to give Alexander Marshall the lands of Dochcarty.¹¹³ This Alexander Marshall was probably the descendant of Marion Hermiston and her husband William Marshall, who had held Balnagown in the fourteenth century but later resigned it to Hugh, lord of Philorth.¹¹⁴ Given the historic links the Marshalls had with the lordship of Balnagown, Earl Alexander's grant to Alexander Marshall may have been tied to the earl's relations with Balnagown.

The Earl's Marriage and Liaisons

The alliance with the highest profile was, of course, the earl's marriage. Earl Alexander was married by 1431 when his mother appeared as the 'senior' lady of the Isles¹¹⁵ and on

¹¹¹ *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 30.

¹¹² *A.L.I.*, no. 31.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 46.

¹¹⁴ See above, 89.

¹¹⁵ *E.R.*, iv, 541.

19 October 1433 he appeared with his wife named 'Jacobella', in a papal supplication.¹¹⁶ This is the sole instance that the name Jacobella is used and subsequent sources indicate that the name of the earl's wife was Elizabeth, with a common misconception that she was Elizabeth Seton, the earl of Huntly's sister, but this has been questioned since the assumption derives solely from Gordon sources.¹¹⁷ The only surname assigned to Elizabeth in contemporary documentation was Haliburton, in a note of discharge dated December 1443 from Elizabeth to John Scrymgeour.¹¹⁸ Marriage to a Haliburton made sense for Alexander MacDonald in gaining momentum in the affairs of the Aird. The portion of the Aird which had long been associated with the Aird family had been inherited by the Chisholms through marriage to Margaret Aird heiress in the mid-fourteenth century, but by the time of MacDonald lordship in Ross the Chisholm male line had in turn died out and upon the death of Alexander Chisholm, grandson of Margaret Aird, Walter Haliburton inherited the Erchless portion of the Aird through his marriage to Chisholm's daughter.¹¹⁹ Therefore Earl Alexander's Haliburton marriage allowed the earl of Ross to pursue a policy of ever widening political overtures with the nobility of the Aird, who were of more local and immediate strategic value for MacDonald security in Ross than a marriage to the Setons at this time.

The earl of Ross had secured a useful marriage for himself, but this did not stop him pursuing other conquests or utilising other liaisons as political tools. One of the more insightful accounts of Earl Alexander's relationship with the earldom is the *Sleat History's* account of his liason with the daughter of Patrick Obeolan, abbot of Carlebay.¹²⁰ Frustratingly, there do not seem to be records from contemporary sources regarding an Abbot Patrick Obeolan/Ross of Lewis or Lochbroom. Despite the lack of contemporary evidence to support this tale, perhaps valuable information can be extracted from it to advance our knowledge of the activities of Clan Ross while under MacDonald lordship. The man Patrick held position west of the earldom of Ross yet still within the lands where the earls of Ross exercised lordship. Without any further evidence of Clan Ross holding position in the isles or in Wester Ross, Patrick might function as a template for studying the cross-traffic of the kindred. Patrick the Red was allegedly an abbot of Carlebay in Lewis with sizable tracts of land in Lochbroom. The earls of Ross had held Skye and

¹¹⁶ C.S.S.R., iv, no. 106.

¹¹⁷ Gordon, *Sutherland*, 76; *H.P.*, i, 93-94; Munro, 'The Lordship of the Isles', 29.

¹¹⁸ *A.L.I.*, no. 41.

¹¹⁹ Batten, *Charters of the Priory of Beaulieu*, 98-99.

¹²⁰ See above, 28.

Lewis in the fourteenth century; most likely these land holdings of Patrick's were a result of earlier infiltration and settlement of the Ross kindred into the Hebrides. It would seem that Patrick's son, 'Norman', secured marital alliances with key regional lords, primarily with vassals of the MacDonalds.

If there is any substance underlying the tale, then it would seem that Earl Alexander secured himself in Ross by taking a 'concubine' from amongst the leading echelons of Ross society which were more than willing to enter into marital arrangements with magnates from the Lords of the Isles. Affiliation with an extended branch of Clan Ross would also have had implications for the earl's tensions with the lords of Balnagown; perhaps the earl was eager to mend relations through a lady of the clan. Alternatively, the earl might have wanted to undermine Balnagown's influence over outlying elements of the clan. It is even possible that this woman was far more important than the term concubine would infer. As explored by W.D.H. Sellar it was common practice for a lord to have several wives over a period of time.¹²¹ This cultural practice would have been particularly useful for Alexander MacDonald in developing political goodwill in his new earldom. In this context Earl Alexander could have had several 'wives', that could have included Abbot Patrick's daughter and the 'Jacobella' mentioned in the papal source being counted among these. Indeed, they could have been the same person. The story becomes convoluted with later events associated with the wife of Alexander's son and heir, John MacDonald:

She was twice brought before the king, as MacDonald could not be induced to part with her, on occasion of her great beauty. The king said, that it was no wonder that such a fair damsel had enticed MacDonald. At last, by the king's persuasion, he married Margaret Livingston, daughter to Sir Alexander Livingston, the Regent, who bore to him John and other two, who died in their infancy.¹²²

Despite the confusion of spousal identity, the tale makes clear that the liaison was valued by the earl of Ross. Indeed, Alexander was a man who did have mistresses. The story of Patrick the Red's daughter could have been conflated with the lady known as 'Christina Macclaide' [most likely MacLeod], Alexander's concubine, found in a papal mandate dated from the year 1445, which gently rebuked Alexander and the lady for their carnal

¹²¹ W.D.H. Sellar, 'Marriage, Divorce and Concubinage', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 51 (1981), 464-493.

¹²² *H.P.*, i, 35.

transgressions.¹²³ Clearly the earl sought to maintain his position by securing important clans and families through a system of mistresses and marriage: a marriage to gain influence in the Aird, and important liaisons, perhaps perceived as marriages, to maintain both Ross and the Isles. What is intriguing is that the earl was married to a woman who had little political influence in the earldom of Ross, but whose family was highly involved in the Aird and other regions of the north. Perhaps this reflected the success Earl Alexander had in fostering stability in Ross while his authority in the Aird and Nairn was threatened by the Douglasses and needed bolstering through a significant marriage.

Relations with the Church

During the transition which saw the lords of the Isles become the earls of Ross, there was a more subtle phenomenon occurring in church practices which affected the secular politics of the earldom. The expansion of pluralism within the Church was gaining momentum in the fifteenth century,¹²⁴ and in those territories which were coming under MacDonald administrative control this phenomenon was accompanied by the secular changes of Earl Alexander's lordship in Ross. Several examples of ecclesiastical pluralists using the secular tensions between James I and Alexander MacDonald to further their own agendas are found in papal supplications in which the supplicants complained that regional conflict rendered their benefices insufficient to sustain them. A supplication by the archdeacon of Caithness, Thomas of Tulloch, found in papal records of 7 June 1429, stated that his archdeaconry had experienced such 'sinister conditions' as to make it impossible to sustain his living.¹²⁵ This was followed by his supplication in papal records on 14 August for the canonry and prebend of Kirkmichael in the diocese of Ross.¹²⁶ This brought Thomas Tulloch into conflict with David 'Petyn' [Petty], vicar of Petty who had held possession of Kirkmichael for four to six years.¹²⁷ In response to Tulloch's claim to Kirkmichael, David of Petty made his own supplications to the papal see in 1431.¹²⁸

¹²³ Ibid., 93-95.

¹²⁴ C.S.S.R., iii, x; A.D.M. Barrell, 'Papal Provisions in Scotland in the Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries', in *Church, Chronicle and Learning in Medieval and Early Renaissance Scotland*, ed. Barbara E. Crawford (Edinburgh, 1999), 215-225.

¹²⁵ C.S.S.R., iii, 23-24.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 34-35. The parish of Kirkmichael in the diocese of Ross was on the Black Isle, north of Rosemarkie, on the Cromarty Firth, see *Atlas of Scottish History to 1707*, ed. Peter G.B. McNeill and Hector L. MacQueen (Edinburgh, 1996), 356.

¹²⁷ C.S.S.R., iii, 34-35, 81-82.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 156-157, 166.

This was not the only opportunistic acquisition that used regional strife as its instrument. In January 1430 William of the Aird supplicated the pope for dispensation to combine the parish churches of Coulba and Wardlaw, which had already been done by the bishop of Moray. The reason given for this unification of churches under one vicar was that war being waged in the area made it impossible for the vicar to sustain himself financially.¹²⁹ Secular strife then was a boon for those churchmen eager to secure further benefices. The language of these supplications to the papal see does seem to corroborate the depiction of outlawry and warfare the chroniclers recorded as the reason for James I imprisoning the lord of the Isles and the Highland nobles in 1428, and it raises the question of how the ecclesiastical community viewed the king's interference in the north. If nothing else, the political and military struggles between Alexander MacDonald and James I from 1428 to 1431 seem to have augmented the supplicants' tendency for utilising hardship and faulty administration as reasons for acquisition. In another supplication from January 1430, Hugh Fraser, sheriff of Inverness, took the opportunity to attempt to install his own kinsman, Alexander Fraser, as prior of Beaulieu by arguing to the pope that the current head of Beaulieu, Prior Gilbert, was a poor administrator.¹³⁰ However, while the Frasers were able to obtain papal consent, they were unable to enforce the papal mandate until a year later, upon the death of Prior Gilbert.¹³¹

The history of the church of Ross during the rule of the MacDonald earls was dominated by the aforementioned Thomas Tulloch, who was bishop of Ross from 1440 to 1461, but whose career involved Ross since 1429. A prominent pluralist, he was archdeacon of Caithness from 1428 to 1437,¹³² and it was from that office that he planned his move into Ross. In the process Tulloch made notable enemies in Ross and Moray, the Munro, Innes and Ross clans being amongst the more prominent of these. The initial source of hostility between Thomas Tulloch and others who wanted to gain position in Ross was his conflict with David Petty over possession of Kirkmichael from 1429 to 1431.¹³³ Additionally, when Tulloch was in Rome in May 1430 he found himself quarrelling with Thomas Duncan, a priest of Aberdeen.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Ibid., 74-75.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹³¹ Ibid., 179. This second document gives Prior Gilbert the surname of MacPherson.

¹³² Watt, *Fasti*, 95.

¹³³ C.S.S.R., iii, 34-35, 81-82, 92-93, 156-157, 166.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 96-97.

Undeterred, in October 1436 Archdeacon Tulloch supplicated the papacy for the deanery of Ross, indicating that he was willing to give up his canonry and prebend of Kirkmichael for the deanery.¹³⁵ He received the support of Pope Eugenius IV and was granted provision to the deanery on 16 October 1436.¹³⁶ This was a direct threat to the establishment in Ross where the subdean, John Innes, was already seen by many as the natural successor to the deanery. The discord of the wider Church in the mid-fifteenth century provided a convenient outlet for factions in Ross to squabble over ecclesiastical position and possession; the Catholic Church was split between papal authority and the authority of the council of Basel. Two weeks after Tulloch was granted provision by the pope, Innes was collated to the deanery, and was in possession while at the council of Basel in November 1436.¹³⁷ Tulloch was the pope's man while Innes was favoured by the council of Basel.

The fight for the deanery was further complicated by the introduction of a third contender, Laurence Piot [Pyott], who received papal provision on 16 November 1436.¹³⁸ But the real challenge for Tulloch remained the subdean, John Innes. As subdean of Ross Innes had more local influence which was magnified by the proximity of the Innes centre of power; the Inneses came from the parish of Urquhart in Moray and were connected to the barony of Innes there.¹³⁹ This was seen through the ability of Innes to maintain possession of the deanery until January 1437.¹⁴⁰ The opposition that Innes and Pyott presented did cause some discomfort for the archdeacon of Caithness, as seen by Tulloch's increased reluctance to let go of his other benefices.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless Tulloch was not dissuaded, and continued to make preparations to demit his canonries and prebends in order to gain possession of the deanery of Ross,¹⁴² while also setting up members of his family in his old holdings. Tulloch managed to retain influence over the canonry and prebend of Kirkmichael through his kinsman Robert Tulloch, precentor of Caithness, who supplicated

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, iv, no. 319.

¹³⁶ *C.P.L.*, viii, 583.

¹³⁷ Watt, *Fasti*, 353-354. Note the alternative name of James rather than John at council of Basel.

¹³⁸ *C.P.L.*, viii, 610-11.

¹³⁹ Black, *Surnames*, 376.

¹⁴⁰ *C.S.S.R.*, iv, no. 340.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, no. 379. This supplication seems to infer that Tulloch was stalling in demitting the canonry and prebend of Croy in the diocese of Moray and the archdeaconry of Caithness until his position as dean of Ross was assured. It appears he was trying to use technicalities to delay demission; he contended Croy did not include a cure, therefore he was not obliged to relinquish it.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, nos. 378a, 378b.

the pope for Kirkmichael in September 1437, even though two other men had already supplicated for the office.¹⁴³

In Scotland the church schism had translated into power struggles to control vacant dioceses which included that of Ross. With the news of the death of John Bullock, bishop of Ross sometime before September 26 1440,¹⁴⁴ different factions immediately began to compete for the bishopric. The objectives of the factions were compounded by a practical need to align with groups within the larger Church which were fighting over ideological beliefs regarding the extent of papal power.

At the time of Bullock's death Thomas Tulloch had been exhibiting his pluralist tendencies. He was subdean of Dunkeld for part of one day on 23 September 1440 before resigning it in favour of obtaining the canonry and prebend of Tannadice in the diocese of St. Andrews.¹⁴⁵ Seeing an opportunity to further advance himself with the advent of the bishop's death, Tulloch received the backing of Pope Eugenius IV to become bishop of Ross three days later.¹⁴⁶ However, this was contested by Andrew Munro, archdeacon of Ross. Munro had received the archdeaconry of Ross in 1422 when he exchanged his canonry and prebend of Croy in the diocese of Moray for it.¹⁴⁷ However, Munro found his position as archdeacon precarious as one David Seton was also named as archdeacon of Ross from 1424 through 1430.¹⁴⁸ Even after the death of Seton, Munro was forced to seek papal recognition but finally Munro's position as archdeacon of Ross was confirmed by Pope Eugenius IV in December 1430.¹⁴⁹ Even then Munro felt his place in the eyes of the papacy was vulnerable, and he corrected his supplication a year later when in April 1431 he supplicated that he had held the archdeaconry for a period of nine years, rather than fifteen years as originally stated in the 1430 supplication.¹⁵⁰ Through his fight to hold on to

¹⁴³ Ibid., nos. 410, 412. There seems to be a typo in no. 410; Robert was mistakenly named precentor of Ross even though further down in the same supplication he holds the precentorship of Caithness. Robert is precentor of Caithness in the years 1435 and 1436; see *ibid.*, nos. 230, 286. Note that Robert Tulloch is not listed as a precentor of Ross in Watt's *Fasti*, but is the precentor of Caithness. See, Watt, *Fasti*, 86, 358.

¹⁴⁴ Watt, *Fasti*, 349.

¹⁴⁵ C.S.S.R., iv, no. 676.

¹⁴⁶ Watt, *Fasti*, 349.

¹⁴⁷ C.S.S.R., i, 310-311.

¹⁴⁸ Watt, *Fasti*, 372.

¹⁴⁹ C.S.S.R., iii, 156. This supplication claims Munro had made the exchange to become archdeacon fifteen years earlier, which would date the year of Munro's possession of the archdeaconry to 1415 rather than 1422.

¹⁵⁰ C.S.S.R., iii, 181.

his archdeaconry Munro seemed to have to contend with a less than sympathetic papacy. This cool relationship might explain why Pope Eugenius IV was more willing to back Thomas Tulloch than Munro in the race to become bishop of Ross in 1440. The struggle over the bishopric displayed similarities to Tulloch's earlier conflict with John Innes over control of the deanery of Ross four years earlier. In both cases, it seems that there was a strong opposition to Tulloch in Ross. In Felix, the anti, or conciliar pope, Andrew Munro found a sponsor to compete against Tulloch for the bishopric of Ross.¹⁵¹ Munro could also count on the support of James, seventh earl of Douglas. It might even have been at the instigation of Douglas that Andrew Munro sought to gain the bishopric of Ross and rebuff the pro-papal Thomas Tulloch. This earl of Douglas was a firm supporter of the Council of Basel. This support was, at least partially, motivated by self-interest as it gave him a means to further his family's fortunes by obtaining the council's approval to grant the bishopric of Aberdeen to his second son, James.¹⁵²

With Douglas already throwing in his lot with the Council of Basel to gain the see of Aberdeen, it was logical for him to support other Basel adherents. In the case of Andrew Munro, the diocese of Ross overlapped with Douglas lands, particularly in the barony of Avoch, making the decision of the succession of a new bishop of Ross who could be depended upon to be an ally important to the earl of Douglas crucial. Unfortunately for Andrew Munro, his bid to be made bishop of Ross was tied to the unsteady fortunes of the Council of Basel and their anti-pope who received limited support in Scotland. In the summer of 1442 a Scottish church council rendered the anti-pope's appointees impotent by excommunicating them and depriving them of their offices; this was followed by the death of the seventh earl of Douglas in March 1443 - which saw an end to Douglas support for the conciliarist cause - and government legislation commanding that the country should stay faithful to Pope Eugenius IV on 4 November 1443.¹⁵³

The death of the seventh earl of Douglas also removed a valuable ally for all the anti-pope's candidates for bishoprics, especially since the new eighth earl of Douglas reversed his deceased father's policy of favouring Basel, and established himself as a strong adherent to the pope. Without Douglas support others who had sided with Basel could not survive. In Ross this meant that Andrew Munro's bid for the bishopric was over, and

¹⁵¹ Watt, *Fasti*, 349.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 3-4. For more on the James, seventh earl of Douglas's relationship with the Scottish church and the Council of Basel see; McGladdery, *James II*, 25-28.

¹⁵³ McGladdery, *James II*, 27-28; *RPS*, 1443/11/3. Date accessed: 2 September 2015.

Thomas Tulloch was using the title of bishop of Ross by May 1441.¹⁵⁴ A prominent feature in his advancement was his nominal support of Pope Eugenius IV to whom Tulloch was indebted in gaining both the positions of dean of Ross in 1436 and bishop of Ross in 1440. In both of these endeavours Tulloch relied on his reputation as a papal supporter to gain office. His opponents, though more locally favoured, had chosen the losing side in the religious schism. Those in the diocese of Ross who chose to oppose Tulloch made the mistake of siding with the Council of Basel, an institution which proved ineffectual in the administration of the Scottish church.

Thomas Tulloch challenged important families in Ross and Moray for control of the diocese of Ross and beat back the opposition by throwing in his lot with the papal supporters rather than the Council of Basel. Yet, although he had become bishop of Ross, Tulloch faced the unpleasant prospect of being a prelate hated by both secular and ecclesiastical communities within his diocese. The chapter of Ross had clearly preferred one of their own, a Munro, to the archdeacon of Caithness. What is not clear is the role that Alexander, earl of Ross played in this power struggle. It would have been difficult for the archdeacon of Ross to proceed in his quest for the bishopric without the approval of the primary secular power in Ross. The archdeacon of Ross could not rely solely on Douglas support to compete against Thomas Tulloch, the papal candidate. To secure support in Ross for his bid Andrew probably relied heavily on his kinsman, the lord of Foulis. George Munro, lord of Foulis, was a consistent companion of the earl of Ross during the summer of 1440,¹⁵⁵ enhanced by Munro's administrative capacity as an important bailie for the earl.¹⁵⁶ It seems likely that George Munro was using his influence and proximity to promote his kinsman, the archdeacon of Ross, to Earl Alexander. The earl could benefit from having a kinsman of one of his closest vassals in Ross as head of the church in Ross. The opportunity to find mutual ground with the seventh earl of Douglas and work together facilitated by the Munros of Foulis may also have been tantalising. These intrigues to control the diocese of Ross in 1440-1442 conceivably laid the foundation for the later MacDonald/Douglas alliance.

¹⁵⁴ *C.D.S.*, iv, no. 1146.

¹⁵⁵ *A.L.I.*, nos. 34, 35, 35a.

¹⁵⁶ There are only two men named in Earl Alexander's charters as bailies in Ross: George Munro appeared twice in this role and Alexander MacCulloch once, see *A.L.I.*, nos. 31, 46. The prominence of the Munros of Foulis as agents for the MacDonald earls of Ross is hard to ignore, especially during the tenure of John MacDonald as earl of Ross; see below, chapter 5.

On the other hand, Earl Alexander would have been wary of the sweeping efforts of James the Gross, earl of Douglas, whose efforts to tighten his grip on the Douglas territories in the north coincided with trying to secure Scottish dioceses for the Council of Basel. To see Andrew Munro as bishop of Ross could have also meant stronger ties between the see of Ross and the Douglasses, a prospect not particularly appealing to the earl of Ross. Assuming that Christine McGladdery was correct in thinking that the MacDonald/Douglas alliance was one of tentative convenience and mutual need rather than one of solidarity of purpose,¹⁵⁷ then the advent of a Douglas-backed bishop of Ross might have been viewed by the earl of Ross as a bishop with doubtful benefits to himself.

The attitude assumed by the earl of Ross towards the Tulloch campaign to control the diocese of Ross is unknown. There are no direct references to Earl Alexander favouring either Munro or Tulloch for the position of bishop. It seems likely that the earl would favour the Munro claim, as that clan's leaders were well entrenched in the secular administration of the earldom. But, unlike the Douglasses, the earl of Ross was not prepared to openly provoke his religious counterpart, Tulloch. Instead, the earl developed a policy of compromise with Thomas Tulloch which sought to maintain cohesion within the ranks of Ross clergy, while incrementally strengthening the prospects of clergy whom the MacDonalds could confidently call allies. In fact, evidence from the papal supplications might indicate that the earl of Ross and Thomas Tulloch were trying to reach some mutual arrangement in 1440. Towards this end Earl Alexander was to rely on one of Tulloch's old enemies. Alexander had already shown his favour to the Inneses of Innes when he confirmed Walter Innes, lord of Innes, described as the earl's 'dilecto nostro consanguineo', the barony of Aberchirder in February 1439.¹⁵⁸ Strong relations with the lord of Innes were to play a key role in the earl's response to Tulloch's campaign to become bishop. In order to prepare to receive the bishopric of Ross Thomas Tulloch had to resign his previous holdings. In the diocese of Ross this meant a new dean was needed. Earl Alexander had wasted no time in placing his own kinsman and adherent, James Innes, a cleric in the diocese of Moray, in position to gain the office.

By September 1440 James Innes was named as the man chosen to assume the deanery of Ross once Thomas Tulloch became bishop with a papal reference to the 'suits and strife'

¹⁵⁷ McGladdery, *James II*, 63.

¹⁵⁸ *A.L.I.*, no. 27.

that accompanied the struggle to control the diocese of Ross.¹⁵⁹ Tulloch's previous competition with another Innes for the deanery of Ross meant this singular favouritism for James Innes marked an attitude of conciliation within the diocese of Ross, probably instigated by Earl Alexander. In a supplication to the papacy less than two weeks later concerning his birth and status, Innes placed emphasis on his being a kinsman to Alexander MacDonald, with the supplication utilizing the full gravitas of Earl Alexander's rank: 'earl of Ross, lord of the Isles and lieutenant of the king in the northern parts of Scotland'.¹⁶⁰ The message was clear: when Tulloch became bishop of Ross, the deanery would pass to a MacDonald adherent and kinsman. In one stroke the earl achieved a compromise which reinforced his patronage with the lord of Innes, quieted rivalries which had been having adverse affects on his earldom and reached an understanding with Tulloch. Considering this, the provision to the bishopric sought by Andrew Munro was probably unsanctioned by Earl Alexander.

Another possible factor which contributed to Earl Alexander's tempered approach in regard to Thomas Tulloch was the desirability of securing the diocese of the Isles for MacDonald adherents. Earl Alexander's brother, Angus, was the bishop of the Isles from 1426 until his death which could have been in 1437 or 1441.¹⁶¹ If Angus were alive until 1441, then the earl of Ross had a substantial incentive for seeking a non-confrontational path in his dealings with Bishop Tulloch of Ross because Tulloch was considered the papacy's choice in Ross, an individual whom the pope could count upon to quell those aligned with the council of Basel. Opposing the papal choice could have had repercussions in the diocese of the Isles. Even if Angus had died in the earlier year of 1437 Earl Alexander would still have wanted good relations with the papacy as the successor to the diocese of the Isles was the son of the prominent MacDonald vassal MacLean of Duart.¹⁶²

While the Munros began to fight Tulloch's claim to the bishopric head-on, the MacDonald/Innes faction in the diocese was seeking a mutual understanding with Tulloch.

¹⁵⁹ C.S.S.R., iv, nos. 676, 681. It seems that this James Innes was related to Walter, lord of Innes since both men were noted as kinsmen to Earl Alexander. This James seems to have been a different individual from the John/James Innes who competed with Thomas Tulloch for the deanery in 1436, but it is likely there was a familial relation as well. As noted in these supplications, Thomas Tulloch's promotion to bishop of Ross affected the affairs in St. Andrews and Dunkeld dioceses as well, a testament to Tulloch's ability to acquire church offices and lands.

¹⁶⁰ C.S.S.R., iv, no. 684. Papal supplications had a tendency towards grandiose titles that were sometimes embellished.

¹⁶¹ Watt, *Fasti*, 264.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

The earl of Ross and his Innes relatives were keen to embrace a solution which saw the diocese of Ross brought together in political unity. This was something the earl of Ross decidedly needed during a period when external pressures caused by Douglas activity, royal aggression and a religious schism threatened the stability of the earldom. Unfortunately for Thomas Tulloch and James Innes, this cosy arrangement was placed in jeopardy by the ambitions of Laurence Piot; his attempt in 1437 to take the deanery of Ross for himself continued to prove problematic for the new bishop elect even though Piot was compensated with the archdeaconry of Caithness, Tulloch's old office.¹⁶³ This was not a coincidence and perhaps the office provided to Piot in Caithness should be seen as compensation with the intention of having him drop his litigation over the deanery of Ross. On 3 October 1440 James Innes requested the pope to provide him to the deanery of Ross regardless of any technical issues over the rule of chancery and despite the ongoing suit between Thomas Tulloch and Laurence Piot.¹⁶⁴ Piot may have represented a serious local challenge since by the spring of 1443 he was receiving the backing of Alexander, lord of Duffus,¹⁶⁵ who was, or was to be, the father-in-law of Alexander Ross, the son of John Ross, lord of Balnagown, in order to obtain the archdeaconry of Caithness for his own kinsman, William Sutherland.¹⁶⁶

The activities of Thomas Tulloch, bishop of Ross, were not the only ones threatening the secular nobles. James, eighth earl of Douglas and Thomas Tulloch, bishop of Orkney were becoming hardened enemies. This came to a head over the issue of who controlled the archdeaconry of Lothian. The bishop of Orkney supplicated to the pope to be allowed to hold the commend of the archdeaconry of Lothian.¹⁶⁷ Douglas had positioned his own loyal kinsman to take this office, but this was blocked by the bishop of Orkney who had managed to gain the right of commend. In October 1444 the earl of Douglas asked Eugenius IV to not allow the bishop of Orkney to interfere with the archdeaconry of Lothian. The earl argued that the bishop of Orkney was not a bishop of Scotland but of another country [Norway] which was adversarial towards the interests of Scotland, and any allowance made towards the bishop in the matter could 'resuscitate ancient enmities and

¹⁶³ *C.S.S.R.*, iv, nos. 398, 399, 414.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, nos. 687, 688.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 923.

¹⁶⁶ Since the date of Alexander Ross's marriage is unknown, as is the date of his birth, it is difficult to know if he was married to the lord of Duffus's daughter by 1443. Because Alexander's father had only become lord of Balnagown in 1440, it seems unlikely.

¹⁶⁷ *C.S.S.R.*, iv, nos. 793, 805.

wars of these kingdoms and great scandals and dangers with the deaths of many men.’¹⁶⁸ This campaign by the earl of Douglas was ongoing throughout the year 1444 but by the end of the year Douglas, with the aid of the king’s name, had convinced the papacy of the dangers posed by Tulloch and the pope withdrew the commend from the bishop of Orkney.¹⁶⁹ The animosity between the bishop of Orkney and the Black Douglasses may have been connected to the bishop’s involvement in the diocese of Moray in 1441 when he campaigned to gain control of the precentorship of Moray which he gave to his kinsman, Andrew Tulloch, archdeacon of Orkney, in 1444.¹⁷⁰

Thomas Tulloch, bishop of Ross, began building a base for his kindred in Ross in a similar fashion to Thomas Tulloch, bishop of Orkney. It is unclear if and how these two men were related; the coincidence of both their careers as bishops ending in 1461¹⁷¹ encourages speculation. The Tullochs are difficult to dissect. George Black was content to identify all Tullochs as deriving their name from the place-name Tulloch in the parish of Dingwall.¹⁷² However, Tulloch, meaning hillock, is a fairly common place-name throughout Scotland.¹⁷³ In the diocese of Ross alone, in addition to the Tulloch of Dingwall, there are Tullochs/Tullichs in the parishes of Fearn, Kilmuir Easter, Kintail, Knockbain and Lochcarron.¹⁷⁴ One possible connection between the Tulloch bishop of Ross and his counterpart in Orkney might have been the Thomas Tulloch, clerk, who was the candidate chosen by the bishop of Ross to succeed to the vacant treasurer’ship of Ross in 1444.¹⁷⁵ In March 1441 a Thomas Tulloch, clerk of St. Andrews diocese, was trying to obtain a canonry and prebend in the diocese of Orkney.¹⁷⁶ If the Thomas Tulloch who became the treasurer of Ross was the same man trying to obtain a canonry and prebend in Orkney, then an administrative Orkney/Ross link could tentatively be suggested.

Even the anathema of excommunication had failed to dampen the activities of Tulloch. At the end of 1444 the bishop of Ross, despite being excommunicated himself, elevated his

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., no. 1079.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., nos. 1086, 1131.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., nos. 760, 767, 1010, 1129, 1135.

¹⁷¹ Watt, *Fasti*, 327-328, 349.

¹⁷² Black, *Surnames*, 781.

¹⁷³ Simon Taylor with Gilbert Márkus, *The Place-Names of Fife*, v (Donington, 2012), 519-520.

¹⁷⁴ Watson, *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, 41, 66, 94, 141, 178, 198.

¹⁷⁵ C.S.S.R., iv, nos. 1126, 1133.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., no. 754.

kinsman, yet another Thomas Tulloch, to the position of treasurer of Ross.¹⁷⁷ His own excommunication was not lifted until June 1445 when the merchants concerned agreed to forgive the bishop.¹⁷⁸ Tulloch's act of installing his kinsman as treasurer of Ross drew the immediate ire of other clerics; the act was contested three months later in January 1445 by Lancelot Ross, cleric of Moray, which spawned a quarrel that was still being fought by May 1448.¹⁷⁹ This initial litigation was just the beginning. The unpopularity of the bishop's actions pertaining to the treasury was seen in subsequent years when no less than three different men sought to contest the placement of another Tulloch in the treasury, a fierce opposition which persisted until 1465.¹⁸⁰

The Tullochs were not the only clerics in Ross facing rising unpopularity. James Innes was drawing equal criticism in his role as dean of Ross. Any support the earl of Ross might have lent to Innes in his bid for the deanery was regretted when Innes drew large amounts of scandal to himself. In November 1445 James Innes was in danger of losing all position. He had already been excommunicated for three years, but had continued to exercise authority as dean of Ross and treasurer of Moray. He was also accused of attacking a clerk, Richard of Tain, in the cathedral church of Ross which resulted in bloodshed, and of obtaining the position of treasurer in Moray while excommunicated. All of these charges were made by David Stewart, son of Alexander, earl of Mar.¹⁸¹ The earl of Ross had an embarrassing kinsman creating spectacles of disrepute within the diocese of Ross, made worse since that kinsman readily advertised his connection to the earl to obtain what he wanted. For Earl Alexander the discomfort was multiplied exponentially since David Stewart, the man trying to supplant James Innes in his offices, was the son of the old MacDonald adversary, Alexander Stewart, earl of Mar. The last thing the earl of Ross needed while manoeuvring tentatively between Douglas and Crown parties was the shade of Mar permeating ecclesiastical affairs in Ross. James Innes, rather than being a conduit through which the earl of Ross and bishop of Ross could find common ground, had become a severe liability for the earl.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1126.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 1218.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 1133; *ibid.*, v, no. 161. Lancelot Ross had tried to obtain the treasurership from its previous occupant, Henry Buge, but had been unsuccessful; see *ibid.*, iv, nos. 983, 991.

¹⁸⁰ See below, 208.

¹⁸¹ *C.S.S.R.*, iv, no. 1261.

Conclusion

By the death of Earl Alexander in 1449¹⁸² the earldom of Ross had experienced great change. The introduction of the MacDonalds as lords of Ross brought a new political structure. The appearance of the MacCullochs as significant administrative agents for the northeast of the earldom was the most identifiable of these changes. This was accompanied by, and probably corresponded with, the reduction of administrative duties given to the Rosses of Balnagown due to the tensions with the earl over Ferincoskry, despite their early allegiance to the MacDonald claim to Ross. Yet throughout his tenure as earl, Alexander still demonstrated an adherence to patterns of continuity between his own lordship and that of previous rulers of Ross. Local powers in Ross continued to play a large part in the administration of the earldom, often through the jurisdictional role of the office of bailie. In fact, the first MacDonald earl of Ross relied on the administrative capabilities and territorial influence of three key clans, the MacCullochs, Munros and the Rosses, in establishing himself into a successful lordship. He did not install large numbers of Hebridean lords in governing roles in Ross, nor did he grant large portions of Ross lands to these magnates. Instead, Earl Alexander relied heavily on the Munros of Foulis to be his administrative right hand in the earldom. Administratively, the earl utilised Clan Ross the least, preferring the MacCullochs and Munros. This might have stemmed from tensions regarding the region of Ferincoskry. Yet, this did not exclude Balnagown Rosses from playing their part in the earldom as seen by their presence in the earl's activities. Alexander MacDonald's lordship over Ross saw a cosmopolitan infrastructure of administration. Magnates from the lordship of the Isles were certainly involved in the policy-making process in the earldom of Ross as seen from their many appearances in witness lists, but they did not replace the established nobility of Ross in land ownership or in holding administrative offices. Earl Alexander's style of lordship over Ross demonstrated a pattern which preferred to retain and promote 'native' lords and clans in Ross.

The lack of Lordship nobles gaining lands in the earldom of Ross was in contrast to acquisitions in Urquhart made by the MacLeans of Lochbuie. The presence of the MacLeans in the Great Glen was most likely linked to Earl Alexander's wider strategy of stabilising and reinforcing his interests in those regions near the earldom which had been traditionally influenced by the earls of Ross or had constituted Ross patrimony lands. From July 1440 to October 1444, surviving documents associated with the earl almost

¹⁸² *Chron. Ross*, 25.

exclusively dealt with the Aird, the sheriffdom of Nairn, Badenoch or the earl's outlying land holdings: the baronies of Kingedward in Buchan and Kincardine in the sheriffdom of Kincardine. These activities focused on securing Earl Alexander as a dominant force in those regions and gaining local allies. These efforts were based on patronage and included dialogue with the Chisholms of Strathglass, Roses of Kilravock, the Frasers of Lovat, the Ogilvies of Beaufort, the Mackintoshes, the Thanes of Cawdor, as well as a marital alliance with the new Haliburton presence in the Aird, which supplanted the Chisholm/Aird power, on the earldom's southeast border. Earl Alexander engaged with the Urquharts, possibly to counter the Douglas earldom of Ormond. Arrangements were made to preserve the outlying Ross baronies of Kingedward and Kincardine, with Seton of Gordon for Kingedward and an Ogilvie/Scrymgeour partnership for Kincardine. The earl effectively tried to shore up border defences and cultivate allies who could act as buffers from potential threats. The agreements with Seton and the Ogilvies in particular suggest the earl of Ross saw these threats as coming primarily from the earls of Douglas and Crawford. Indeed, one of the central themes of Earl Alexander's tenure as earl of Ross seems to have been to insulate his earldom from the Douglasses and contain their ambitions in the north. In this the earl was aided by his other office, the Justiciarship north of the Forth, which provided jurisdictional influence that accentuated the power of the earl, and was aided by allies who also held important office such as William Leslie, sheriff of Inverness. The use of royal office to project the power and status of the earl of Ross was not unique to Earl Alexander. In this he was emulating, either consciously or subconsciously, the MacTaggart earls of Ross who had used the official appointments given to them by Edward I, Robert Bruce and David II to enhance their authority in the north and augment the importance of their earldom.

These secular considerations were influenced by affairs in the diocese of Ross. During most of his tenure as earl Alexander MacDonald had to carefully navigate a complicated ecclesiastical battle for the diocese being fought by some of his closest adherents in Ross, against a backdrop of European ecclesiastical schism. This clerical battle had profound implications for the earl to consider in his own efforts to conduct secular administration in his earldom; it was also a factor in the earl's own stance towards national politics. When Thomas Tulloch entered the diocese of Ross, the Munros sought the aid of the council of Basel to rebuff this intrusion; this brought the Munros into closer alignment with the ambitions of the new seventh and eighth earls of Douglas. Consequently the tensions within the diocese of Ross were connected to Douglas consolidation of their northern interests, while also connecting Ross to a major schism within the Catholic Church. It

seems Earl Alexander was keenly aware of these implications and any desire he might have had to reinforce relations with his Ross vassals by supporting the Munro and Innes clans in their struggle against Tulloch was likely tempered by the realisation that by doing so, he could become vulnerable from unwanted Douglas overtures in Ross.

Yet throughout all of these tensions from 1431, when the king released Alexander from imprisonment, until the death of the earl in 1449, the earldom of Ross was fairly quiet in the histories of Scotland; the chroniclers were silent. Additionally, no references are made in traditional clan histories to feuds plaguing the earldom. This silence in history can be interpreted as a period of relative prosperity and peace within the earldom which largely preserved the existing tenurial order in Ross. Importantly, it demonstrated that the nobles of Ross and Alexander MacDonald were able to find common ground, creating a coherent and functioning administration. Further testament to the skill of Alexander MacDonald as earl of Ross, and a sense of unity within the earldom, was seen when his son John assumed the reins of leadership in Ross as a minor. There were no symptoms within the earldom of Ross of unrest or discontent normally associated with the death of an unpopular magnate. On the contrary, the new earl of Ross found himself in an earldom where the local lords seemed largely content with MacDonald lordship. This was seemingly reciprocated. Perhaps the most persuasive argument for identifying the emphasis of Alexander's lordship is found in the reported locations of his death and burial: Dingwall and the canonry of Ross respectively.¹⁸³ Indeed, this has been seen by Jean Munro as evidence of Alexander's identification and preoccupation with being the earl of Ross rather than his role as lord of the Isles.¹⁸⁴

By all accounts the first MacDonald earl of Ross may have had a rocky start as earl with crown interference, but his lordship matured as a successful fusion of Hebridean lordship with elements familiar to the nobility of Ross. In his exploration of the lordship of the Isles, Boardman suggests that the burial of Alexander - and subsequent burial of his son Gillespie - at Rosemarkie underlines the extent Alexander had become integrated into the earldom; Alexander's performance as justiciar north of the Forth and his familial links to the royal dynasty had established him as a good and prestigious lord in the eyes of the people of Ross and the wider north.¹⁸⁵ Boardman's depiction seems to accurately reflect Alexander MacDonald's life; the earldom of Ross and other administrative duties in the

¹⁸³ *Chron. Ross*, 10.

¹⁸⁴ Munro, 'The Lordship of the Isles', 29.

¹⁸⁵ Boardman, 'The lost world', 170-172.

east took priority over his duties as lord of the Isles. This preoccupation with Ross and eastern lordships was most likely due to the practicalities associated with the near constant struggle for influence with James I in the 1420s and 1430s and the Douglasses in the 1440s. Indeed, Alexander MacDonald's life as earl, as well as the earldom of Ross itself, might be defined by these struggles.

Chapter IV: John MacDonald, Forfeiture and Aftermath: 1449-1517

The period 1449 to 1517 was dominated by John MacDonald's rule of Ross as the last MacDonald earl; his forfeiture of Ross and the Isles saw the earldom come directly under royal Stewart control, followed by the subsequent unrest and rebellion of various branches of Clan Donald against royal authority. This chapter is more segregated in structure by focusing on the earldom and earl through an outward perspective followed by an inward analysis. This is because certain themes discussed extend over many years and would be confusing to study in a purely chronological structure.

The chapter begins with a narrative of John MacDonald's political alliances and relations with the Stewart kings while he was earl, and examines the factors that led to John's forfeiture of Ross. Once the political context between Ross and the rest of the kingdom is set, the chapter then explores John MacDonald's lordship in the earldom of Ross, and attempts to understand the earl's extension of patronage to determine where administrative power in the earldom lay, while questioning whether there was any continuity between John MacDonald's pattern of leadership and his father's. This is followed by another look at the relations with the diocese. Once the study of John's lordship of Ross is complete the chapter turns to look at how the local powers in Ross reacted to the changes brought about by the forfeiture and discusses, from a Ross perspective, the intermittent rebellions led by John MacDonald's son, Angus Og, and then by the MacDonalds of Lochalsh.

Douglasses and Kings: 1449-1475

When John MacDonald inherited the earldom from his father he also inherited a cool relationship with James II, while powerful Douglas earldoms threatened to eclipse his own power. This was a precarious position for the new earl of Ross, a minor at fifteen years old,¹ and might have dictated the terms of his marriage. The *Auchinleck Chronicle* indicates that by September 1449 Earl John had married Elizabeth Livingstone, daughter of James Livingstone, the king's chamberlain.² Considering John's age, this marriage may have been arranged by Livingstone in a bid to gain powerful allies as his grip over James II waned. The Livingstones had been a power in the king's court throughout the minority of

¹ *E.R.*, v, xcii, 393-394, 462, 516; vi, 158, 236.

² *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 172 (f. 122r).

James II since they had imprisoned the queen mother, Joan Beaufort, in 1439. They vied with the Crichtons for control of the young king, and had carved out a tenuous alliance with James, eighth earl of Douglas which dominated court affairs throughout the 1440s.³ Yet, the Livingstones were not well liked by their Douglas allies, who saw them as upstarts.⁴ Nevertheless, for Earl John there were potential benefits to being allied with the Livingstones. Norman Macdougall suggests that Earl John and his advisors could have wanted the marriage because it linked him directly to the family who controlled the king.⁵ Additionally, Earl John seems to have been promised the keepership of Urquhart castle as part of the arrangement.⁶

But the marriage of James II in July 1449⁷ signalled that the king was no longer a minor, and eager to assert himself over those who had controlled the minority government. Unfortunately for the earl of Ross, this meant he could not capitalise on any perceived advantages that could have come from his marriage, when James II decided to destroy his Livingstone officials on 23 September 1449. James Livingstone was imprisoned in Blackness castle with his brother, Alexander Livingstone, the Justiciar of Scotland. This was followed by the Livingstone forfeiture in January 1450, accompanied by the executions of Robert Livingstone, the king's comptroller, and Alexander Livingstone's son.⁸ James Livingstone managed to escape and fled to the safety offered by his new son-in-law. In March 1451 the earl of Ross attacked and captured both Inverness and Urquhart castles and levelled Ruthven castle, apparently because the king failed to honour his agreement to give the earl Urquhart castle and 'gude lordschipe'.⁹ Scholarship has interpreted the attacks as the reactions of a livid Earl John against the king for rendering his new in-laws pariahs and for being an untrustworthy monarch; the king himself sanctioned the earl's marriage while instigating the Livingstone's destruction within the same month as the earl's wedding.¹⁰ The animosity felt by the earl of Ross towards James

³ Ibid., 160 (f. 109r); McGladdery, *James II*, 15-19, 32-41; Brown, *Black Douglasses*, 257-258, 272-274.

⁴ Marion Stewart, 'Holland's 'Howlat' and the Fall of the Livingstones', *Innes Review*, 26 (1975), 67-79; McGladdery, *James II*, 52-53, 62.

⁵ Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 251.

⁶ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 169 (f. 118v).

⁷ Ibid., 171 (f. 121v).

⁸ Ibid., 172 (f. 122r-f.122v); McGladdery, *James II*, 49-54; Stewart, 'Holland's 'Howlat'', 71-75.

⁹ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 169, 172 (f. 118v, f. 122r).

¹⁰ McGladdery, *James II*, 62; Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 251-252.

II in 1451 was to set the tone for Clan Donald's relationship with the crown for the remainder of Earl John's lifetime.

At this point the alternative date for the Ross bond with Douglas and Crawford presents itself. The year 1452 proved one of the more eventful of John MacDonald's early years as earl of Ross, and was tied to the death of another earl of Douglas. William, eighth earl of Douglas, had received a safe-conduct from the king but was murdered at Stirling castle in February 1452 after he refused to forswear the bond he had made with Crawford and Ross.¹¹ This set into motion a destructive path for the remaining Black Douglasses who responded with military action against the king. The subsequent restlessness throughout the kingdom was compounded by the death of Alexander, earl of Crawford, in September 1453,¹² and resulted in the death of Archibald Douglas, earl of Moray, at the battle of Arbroath and the subsequent execution of Hugh Douglas, earl of Ormond, on 1 May 1455.¹³ These deaths were capitalised on by the government which pronounced the forfeiture of the Black Douglasses by an act of parliament on 17 June 1455.¹⁴

With the earl of Ross heavily involved in the political manoeuvring associated with the Douglas impasse with James II in the 1450s, it is possible that the earl's politics dictated the actions of the local lords of Ross. As noted, the years 1451-1452 were important years for Earl John as he pressed into Urquhart and Inverness. At the same time, an unplanned impediment to the earl's plans in the sheriffdom of Inverness occurred in Ross. A feud between the earl of Ross and the clans of Wester Ross was destined to turn into one of the great clan battles of the fifteenth century.

The Munro Tree claims the battle of Bealach nam Brog occurred in 1452 and that George, lord of Foulis, was killed.¹⁵ The date and particulars of the battle vary according to different sources, but the general tale follows that clans in Wester Ross and North Argyll, dissatisfied with the earl of Ross, raided Easter Ross, where they kidnapped either the second son of the earl, or the lord of Balnagown, at Balnagown. The Munros and Dingwalls pursued the raiders to rescue the kidnapped person, and a battle was fought at Bealach nam Brog where the Munros and Dingwalls won a pyrrhic victory in which the

¹¹ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 165 (f. 114v-f. 115r).

¹² *Ibid.*, 163 (f. 112r-f. 112v).

¹³ Pitscottie, *Historie*, i, 122-123; *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 772.

¹⁴ *RPS*, 1455/6/6. Date accessed: 23 April 2014.

¹⁵ *Munro Tree*, 9, M.

leadership of both Dingwalls and Munros were killed, leaving the Munros with a child as lord of Foulis.¹⁶

Given the context of the early 1450s, it looks as though Earl John's enemies in the west took advantage of the preoccupation he had with his own assaults on Inverness and Urquhart in 1451 and the chaos following the death of the eighth earl of Douglas, to raid Easter Ross. The raiding party was followed by the Munros and Dingwalls and the kidnapped child was saved. It should be noted that the *Wardlaw MS* states that the Munro/Dingwall force was led by the Fraser lord of Lovat.¹⁷ Given the pro-Fraser perspective of the *Wardlaw MS*, the introduction of a Fraser-led rescue is unsurprising, but if the tale is accurate then the Frasers continued to honour their bond of manrent made to Earl John's father while being tenants of Archibald Douglas, earl of Moray.¹⁸

Importantly, this battle might indicate that by 1452 relations between the earl of Ross and the lord of Balnagown had improved despite the dispute over Ferincoskry. By the summer of 1454 Earl John had granted lands in Strathcarron and Strathoykell to John Ross, lord of Balnagown.¹⁹ This grant indicates that John Ross had finally been able to regain some of the lands in these regions his family had lost to the Mackays, as the lands in this charter had been granted to Neil Mackay in 1430.²⁰ This grant might have represented a compromise resulting from the efforts of John Ross to regain his Ferincoskry possessions, or it may have also been influenced by John Ross's faithful service in the wake of the troubles within the earldom. Since George Munro was killed in 1452, the earl may have needed to rely on John Ross more heavily on local matters of the earldom.

Two years after Bealach nam Brog it seems that the Munros found themselves in battle again, this time as the aggressors. As with the battle of Bealach nam Brog, historians have assigned many different dates to Clach na h-Àirigh and there are variations to the event in each different telling, but the most likely date of this battle accepted by most scholars is that given by the *Kinrara MS* which states that the battle of Clach na h-Àirigh was fought in 1454. The story goes that John Munro of Miltown, the tutor of Munro, was insulted by the locals in Strathardle, in Perthshire. Desiring to avenge the insult, the tutor gathered the

¹⁶ *Wardlaw*, 82-84; Gordon, *Sutherland*, 36; Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 469-471.

¹⁷ *Wardlaw*, 82-84.

¹⁸ See above, 148-149.

¹⁹ *A.L.I.*, no. 57.

²⁰ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 147; see above, 156.

Munro forces together and raided Strathardle and the surrounding countryside. Upon their return to Ross, the Munros ran into the chief of Clan Mackintosh who demanded a share of the spoils in exchange for passage through Mackintosh territory. This led to a disagreement between the two men whereupon Mackintosh called his military force and caught up with the Munros at Clach na h-Àirigh, sparking a battle which saw the wounding of the tutor of Munro.²¹

If the accounts are accurate about the geography then the target of the Munro raid was a region filled with both Douglas enemies during a time when the Douglasses themselves were sorely pressed; perhaps then it is too simplistic to view the Munro attack as only a raid for cattle, for the Munros penetrated far into the south, into territory dominated by the Crawfords, the Crichtons and the king. The Munros had already colluded with eighth earl of Douglas in the early 1440s in a bid to take the bishopric of Ross; they had a vested interest in Douglas matters as Munro lands were adjacent to, and within, the earldom of Ormond. They may have even served in administrative capacities for the Douglasses as bailies in the Douglas barony of Avoch.²² These direct ties between the Munros and Douglasses were accentuated when the earl of Ross, liege lord of the Munros, officially threw in his lot with the Douglasses between 1445 and 1452.²³

It is curious that the *Kinrara MS* states that the tutor of Foulis met Mackintosh at the river Findhorn, and when negotiations failed Mackintosh commanded the men of Petty and Lochardil to obstruct the progress of Munro until he could bring his own forces to bear. Both Findhorn and Petty lay within the territory of John Douglas, lord of Balvenie. If accurate, it is hard to accept that John Douglas was unaware of the Munros traversing his territory on a military endeavour. His awareness of Munro activity would have increased exponentially when Mackintosh ordered a vengeful pursuit of Munro using manpower drawn from Douglas lands. The accounts of the confrontation agree that Mackintosh aggression towards the Munros only occurred with the return of the Munro army; no mention of Mackintosh interference occurred during the initial Munro march. It seems that Munro and Mackintosh were not necessarily at odds prior to their disagreement. Why then

²¹ *Invernessiana*, 127; Mackenzie, *History of the Munros of Fowlis*, 25-26; *Wardlaw*, 86. The office of 'tutor' seems to indicate that John Munro of Miltown was the guardian of his nephew, John, lord of Foulis, who would have been a minor in 1454 after the premature death of George Munro at Bealach nam Brog in 1452. Presumably John Munro of Miltown 'the tutor' was the practical leader of the Munros during this period.

²² *Munro Writs*, 5, no. 14.

²³ *A.L.I.*, no. 45.

did Mackintosh and the tutor of Foulis come to blows? Perhaps the Munros were encouraged by the Douglasses to inflict havoc on their enemies on the understanding that they would split the spoils in the aftermath, with Mackintosh acting as some sort of Douglas middleman, but once the successful raid had been accomplished the terms of the split were not resolved.

Mackintosh's motivation for attacking the Munros was probably also tied to his tenuous relations with the earl of Ross; Clan Mackintosh's loyalty to the MacDonalds had been questionable since 1429 when they, along with the Camerons,²⁴ had betrayed Earl Alexander MacDonald. The visible split in the 1450s between crown and Douglas parties left Mackintosh free to act in a manner which placed his clan on the good side of the crown while exposing the Clan Mackintosh to limited repercussions that might stem from the earl of Ross, who had already demonstrated that he was content to allow others to head efforts to support the Douglasses. By confronting the Munros, Mackintosh calculated that he did not have to directly attack the Douglasses or the earl of Ross and yet could still claim to support the crown faction.

The Munros also had to pass through the Aird on their way to their intended target. Again, there is no reference in the sources to animosity between the families of the Aird and the Munro force. On the contrary, the *Wardlaw MS* states that the injured Munro tutor was given succour by the Fraser lord of Lovat, and that because of this a lasting friendship was struck between the lords of Foulis and Lovat.²⁵ Within the political context, this could be interpreted as willingness by the Frasers to collude with the designs of the earl of Ross during 1454, an extension of the lord of Lovat's own loyalty to Archibald Douglas, earl of Moray and to the bond of manrent that the lord of Lovat had entered into with the previous earl of Ross, Earl Alexander MacDonald, in 1442.²⁶

In the aftermath of the battle, Earl John began to seek others to replace Mackintosh as his primary administrative agent in Lochaber. By 20 April 1456 the earl was granting to a Somerled, son of John MacSorlie, the office of Toiseachdeor of all the lands of Lochaber with the exception of those held by MacLean of Duart.²⁷ Alison Cathcart noted that for many clans the 1450s-1460s represented a period of MacDonald/Gordon competition to

²⁴ See above, 141.

²⁵ *Wardlaw*, 86.

²⁶ *A.L.I.* no. 37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 61.

control the centre of Scotland, and also suggested that the closer ties between Mackintosh and Gordon led to the hesitation by the earl of Ross to allow Mackintosh a continued position in Lochaber; but she also acknowledged the brevity of this policy since the next Mackintosh chief, Duncan, was granted those lands and titles previously refused to his father.²⁸ However, it is possible that the refusal of the earl of Ross to acknowledge the claims of Malcolm Mackintosh in Lochaber in 1454 was a direct repercussion of the Mackintosh attack on the Munros. Accordingly, Earl John vacillated over Mackintosh claims in Lochaber. By 1456 Malcolm Mackintosh was unsuccessfully petitioning the earl for his lands and office of bailie after the earl had deprived him of his position and possessions in Lochaber.²⁹ If the battle was fought in 1454, then this unwillingness by John MacDonald to acknowledge Mackintosh's claim could be considered a reflection of the earl's doubts towards Mackintosh, and an indication of the implicit blessing the Munros had from the earl of Ross in conducting their raid.

If nothing else, the battle of Clach na h-Àirigh demonstrated the tensions being felt in Ross during the events leading up to the destruction of Douglas power. The Munro raid could be interpreted as a gesture of anti-crown sentiment in response to the handling of the Douglasses by the king. Yet any feeling of mutual alliance that may have developed as a result of the 1445 x 1452 bond between Ross and Douglas was probably superficial since Douglas rule in the north was also superficial. As Michael Brown noted, Douglas power in the north was not consolidated despite the efforts of the three Douglas brothers because inevitably the northern Douglas earls were drawn to affairs in the south, in the Douglas heartland, to support their other brother, the earl of Douglas.³⁰ In all likelihood the Munro raid was an opportunistic attack on a weakened region, which was justified by being attached to the Douglas cause. Nevertheless, the motivations behind the raid did not affect the coordination underlying the attack. The Munro assault deep into Angus and Perthshire coincided with attacks conducted by the earl of Ross's cousin, Donald Balloch, in Arran, the Cumbraes and Inverkip after the earl met with the earl of Douglas.³¹

These incursions seem to corroborate the delegated nature of Earl John's rule; his relative youth dictated that he relied on powerful kin and clans in Ross to act for him. MacDougall suggests that by the 1450s the lordship of the Isles and the earldom of Ross functioned

²⁸ Cathcart, *Kinship and Clientage*, 163-164; *A.L.I.*, no. 88.

²⁹ *A.L.I.*, nos. 62, 63, 64.

³⁰ Brown, *Black Douglasses*, 271-272.

³¹ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 167-168 (f. 117r-f. 117v).

under separate leadership; Donald Balloch took over the lordship of the Isles while Earl John restricted his practical lordship to Ross.³² Indeed, the earl's direct lordship seems to have been limited to only Easter Ross, since he had delegated authority of the west and north of Ross to his brother, Gillespie. But it is too easy to explain away John MacDonald as a figurehead while Donald Balloch took over in the Isles. The earl of Ross assigned his lieutenants to respond to Douglas calls for aid. Donald Balloch focused on Arran while John Munro led a raiding party from Ross towards the south to plunder northern Perthshire. These skirmishes and raids were not isolated events, but were products of the unrest being felt across Scotland as matters came to a head between the king and the Black Douglases. More importantly, the clans of Ross were clearly willing to act militarily on behalf of their earl.

The Risks of Opportunity

The elimination of the Black Douglases and the earl of Crawford had mixed implications for the earl of Ross. Earl John was faced with the loss of his allies which dictated that he needed to tread a fine line. However, those same allies had threatened Ross's dominance of the north, and were now neutralised; the elimination of the earl of Ormond, and the subsequent forfeiture of his earldom meant that the earl of Ross was no longer hemmed in by Black Douglas power on the Black Isle. Additionally, overtures of friendship by James II to his MacDonald vassals accompanied the destruction of the Douglases and Crawford,³³ and Earl John was able to capitalise on the recent struggles by gaining royal recognition of his own 1451 acquisitions when he received the liferent of both Urquhart and Glenmoriston.³⁴ At the same time his father-in-law, James Livingstone, received royal forgiveness and was made keeper of Inverness Castle.³⁵ The king was also eager to solicit the goodwill of Earl John's brother, Gillespie of Lochalsh.³⁶ In fact, Gillespie benefited directly from the forfeited Douglases when the king granted him the fermes of the barony of Redcastle and the keepership of Redcastle Castle, one of the primary strongholds of the

³² Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 255.

³³ For a better understanding of why the king was willing to compromise with the earl of Ross and his kinsmen see; McGladdery, *James II*, 105-106.

³⁴ *E.R.*, vi, 221, 376, 514, 650.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, v, 639.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vi, 124.

forfeited earldom of Ormond, in 1456.³⁷ Gillespie was also granted the fermes of Gargistown and Hilstown and even some of the fermes of Avoch.³⁸ Gillespie's control of Redcastle and Avoch was perhaps complemented by James Livingstone's involvement in the supplies of both these baronies, as seen in 1458.³⁹

Earl John also gained the position of sheriff of Inverness by 1458,⁴⁰ and by 1460 James Livingstone was allowed to come back to court and keep his position as Master of the King's Household.⁴¹ Indeed, the brief period of good Crown/Ross relations in the 1450s might have been the instrument through which Earl John could exercise his rights over the Ross patrimony in Buchan. On 2 September 1455 Earl John gave sasine to his wife of joint infeftment of his lands of Kingedward in the earldom of Buchan.⁴² This was the first reference to Earl John assuming control of his Buchan inheritance, which had previously been under the crown's direct authority.⁴³

Munro of Foulis was another who benefited from the downfall of the Douglasses. On 20 March 1458 King James II granted to John Munro, lord of Foulis, certain lands lying within the earldom of Ormond and sheriffdom of Inverness.⁴⁴ This was an interesting grant since the Munros of Foulis had been Douglas allies with a long-standing administrative relationship in Avoch,⁴⁵ recently reinforced by a mutual desire to prevent Thomas Tulloch from becoming the bishop of Ross. Furthermore, the Munro incursion into Perthshire, ostensibly in support of their Douglas allies, in 1454⁴⁶ could not have been looked upon favourably by the king. Yet granting Douglas lands in the earldom of Ormond to the Munros was a clever move calculated to placate a potential source of regional instability, and show favour to tenants of the earl of Ross. The grant then could be interpreted as a payoff to secure the traditional administrator in the region. This was in keeping with royal

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 376, 379, 381, 466, 473, 476, 487, 518, 524, 528, 530, 649, 653, 662. The earldom of Ormond did not survive the Douglas forfeitures, but elements of the earldom composed the basis for the creation of James III's second son, James, as Marquis of Ormond, see below, 215.

³⁸ *E.R.*, vi, 379, 381.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 487.

⁴⁰ *A.L.I.*, no. 69.

⁴¹ Fraser, *Lennox*, ii, 73-74 (no. 51).

⁴² *A.L.I.*, no. 59.

⁴³ *E.R.*, v, 462, 516; vi, 158.

⁴⁴ *Munro Writs*, 6-7, no. 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, no. 14.

⁴⁶ See above, 182-185.

policy as seen by the overtures of friendship towards Gillespie, lord of Lochalsh, after the Black Douglas forfeitures. These gains might further explain the split nature of MacDonald support of their Douglas allies. Donald Balloch could use the Douglas alliance as an excuse to pursue his own agenda on the isle of Arran but for John MacDonald in his capacity as earl of Ross the reduction of the Black Douglasses, especially the earl of Ormond, was a great boon; it meant that the earl of Ross did not have to contend with a rival power in the north, and extended his influence in what had been Douglas lands.

By 1455 the three Douglas brothers - the earl of Ormond, the earl of Moray and the lord of Balvenie - had all been eliminated as potential threats to the lordship exercised by John, earl of Ross, in northern Scotland. The eclipse of the Black Douglas family and subsequent division of the Douglas hegemony in the north proved temporarily beneficial for the earl of Ross and his followers. However, the king was taking ominous actions that might have made the magnates of Ross wonder if they had not been better off with the Douglasses. With the incorporation of Black Douglas lands into royal holdings, James II allocated Dunskaith - part of the defunct earldom of Ormond, in the lordship of Ardmeanach – along with the proceeds of the Cromarty/Nigg ferry, to the building and maintenance of a chaplaincy for the collegiate church of Tain.⁴⁷ It has been argued that this was a blatant attempt by the king to establish himself as patron of a saint who was so important to Easter Ross, and thereby assert royal authority in that area.⁴⁸ In this, the king was repeating the actions of the displaced Douglasses.

In August 1455 James II further invested himself in the burgh of Inverness by issuing a letter to the effect that although Rosemarkie had been recognised as a burgh with the accompanying privileges, this should not be to the detriment of the burgh of Inverness. The earl of Orkney, an opponent of the earl of Ross, was a witness to the king's act.⁴⁹ His presence is understandable as he was the king's chancellor, but it may also indicate the underlying intent of the king's letter. In the burghs of Tain, Dingwall and Rosemarkie the crown was using a double-edged policy: the privileges of the burghs were acknowledged by the king to enhance royal influence in Ross by these reminders that the burghs held their

⁴⁷ R.W. Munro and Jean Munro, *Tain Through the Centuries* (Edinburgh, 2005), 23-25.

⁴⁸ *Historic Tain*, 29. For more on St. Duthac see; Thomas Turpie, 'Our Friend in the North: the Origins, Evolution and Appeal of the Cult of St Duthac of Tain in Later Middle Ages', *Scottish Historical Review*, 93 (2014), 1-28; Thomas Turpie, 'The Many Lives of St Duthac of Tain. Tracing the Origins of a Late Medieval Scottish Saint', *Northern Studies*, 44 (2013), 3-20.

⁴⁹ *Invernessiana*, 127-128.

rights and success from the crown. At the same time, he severely curbed the economic expansion of these burghs to the benefit of Inverness.

Royal engagement with the burghs was accompanied by increased investment in military infrastructure, which might have had undertones of hostility towards the earl of Ross and his allies. Between 1457 and 1460 significant funds were used by the king to enhance Inverness castle.⁵⁰ Evan Barron chose to interpret the extensive building projects at Inverness castle, as indication of Livingstone's poor management of the castle, allowing it to fall into disrepair.⁵¹ Even so, the military build-up at Inverness seems suspiciously similar to the 1410 military investitures employed by the Duke of Albany and earl of Mar to contain the MacDonalds and their sympathisers in Ross.⁵²

Renewed Aggression and Forfeiture

The death of James II in 1460⁵³ signalled an end to the improved relations between Earl John and the crown that had briefly characterised the late 1450s. From 1460 to 1469 James III was controlled by various factions who were intent on securing their own legacies.⁵⁴ The government was first led by William Sinclair, earl of Orkney and Caithness, and the queen mother, Mary of Gueldres. This was unfortunate for the earl of Ross, who was himself an enemy of Sinclair. At the centre of the MacDonald/Sinclair feud was control over Caithness. The Book of Clanranald recorded that Earl John's half-brother, Hugh of Sleat, attacked and plundered Orkney in 1460.⁵⁵ Norman Macdougall suggests that the MacDonald attacks on the earldom of Orkney were a result of the installation of William Sinclair as head of the minority government.⁵⁶ A further act of defiance towards the Sinclair/Gueldres government was made by the earl of Ross; the first parliament of the minority government on 23 February 1461 saw the earl bring forth the full might of his domains in a show of power. The Auchinleck Chronicle stated that the entire contingent of lords from the Isles went with John as well as his father-in-law, James Livingstone, Livingstone's nephew, James Lord Hamilton, and others where 'thai did litill gud in the

⁵⁰ *E.R.*, vi, 221, 469, 474, 482, 521, 656.

⁵¹ Evan MacLeod Barron, *Inverness and the MacDonalds*, (Inverness, 1930), 35-37.

⁵² See above, 130-132.

⁵³ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 169 (f. 119r-f. 119v).

⁵⁴ For a detailed analysis of the many coups and power plays of the minority governments of James III see; Macdougall, *James III*, 40-95.

⁵⁵ *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 169.

⁵⁶ MacDougall, *James III*, 42.

forsaid parliament.⁵⁷ The Isles delegation may also have included Hugh of Sleat, chagrined by William Sinclair's success in the new government.⁵⁸ This disruptive contingent seems to have deterred the parliament from its objectives, which probably included targeting the enemies of Sinclair and Mary of Gueldres.

The earl of Ross and his allies seemed to have contributed to the uncertainties of the minority government and, perhaps, to Orkney's continued presence at the Scottish court rather than in his own domain or attending his other master, the king of Denmark. The earl of Orkney was supported by the bishop of Orkney, William Tulloch, who wrote a letter to the king of Denmark excusing the absence of the earl of Orkney, who had been summoned to the Danish court, because the earl was busy counselling the new king of Scotland.⁵⁹ Insulting the minority government meant the earl of Ross needed to bolster his own borders from the threat of royal repercussions. This seemed to include a restructuring of the balance of power on the northern borders of the earldom of Ross, the grants to his brother Gillespie being the most prominent of these.⁶⁰ These grants placed the strongest member of Clan Donald in a position to intimidate Caithness.

Earl John could afford to defy the government since Mary of Gueldres was forced to focus her attentions on relations with England; on 4 March 1461 Edward, earl of March, son of the slain Duke of York, was crowned Edward IV while the Lancastrian king, Henry VI, with his wife, Margaret of Anjou, and their son, Edward, found sanctuary in Mary of Gueldres's Scotland.⁶¹ Pressures on the minority government seemed to have succeeded and on 27 June 1461 James Kennedy, bishop of St Andrews was on Bute with Livingstone, Hamilton, the earl of Crawford, and others, presumably seeking a mutual understanding with the earl of Ross and Donald Balloch,⁶² but this seems to have been a failed diplomatic venture. The weakness of the queen mother's position was made clear when by 1462 Mary

⁵⁷ *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 170 (f. 120r). It is noteworthy that the nobles of Ross were not mentioned as being a part of the earl's delegation in the account of the chronicle. If Earl John was making a display of power at the 1461 winter parliament then it would have been in his interest to bring the nobles of Ross. Were they simply overlooked by the *Auchinleck Chronicle*? Or was there some sort of segregation between the nobles of the Isles and Ross?

⁵⁸ Boardman, *Campbells*, 176.

⁵⁹ *Orkney Recs.*, 53-55.

⁶⁰ *A.L.I.*, no. 82; see below, 196-198.

⁶¹ Macdougall, *James III*, 45.

⁶² *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1196.

of Gueldres was fighting with Bishop Kennedy for control of the government; this dispute would last until her death on 1 December 1463.⁶³

It was during this period that the earl of Ross chose to create ties with the Yorkist king, Edward IV. In February 1462 the earl of Ross, Donald Balloch with his son John, and the forfeited earl of Douglas entered into the famous “Westminster-Ardtornish” treaty with Edward IV, the Yorkist king of England; they proposed to divide Scotland between them.⁶⁴ From the earl of Ross’s perspective this agreement was probably a reaction to the minority government of James III led by Mary of Gueldres, whose luke-warm support of the Lancaster cause was a liability that the earl of Ross and Donald Balloch could exploit. If the attentions of Edward IV and the minority governments of James III could be kept on each other, the earl of Ross and his kinsmen were free from royal interference in their own domains and could use Edward IV as leverage when dealing with those that controlled the Scottish court. The accord with Edward IV must have seemed even more beneficial to Earl John when Bishop Kennedy, a Lancaster supporter who was keen to reaffirm the Auld Alliance with France, exposed Scotland to the threat of English invasion after his plotting with the Lancasters in 1462-3 kept ending in disasters.⁶⁵

The problems of the minority government permitted the earl of Ross to flex his strength in regional affairs as well. Between 1461 and 1464 Earl John was extending his influence into Lorn, and, using his office as sheriff of Inverness, established himself as a dominant force in Moray and Inverness where he helped himself to the royal revenues in the old Douglas lands in Moray, and Inverness.⁶⁶ By 5 August 1464 the Scottish court was in Inverness as part of a royal circuit in the north.⁶⁷ Underlying this trip seems to have been another diplomatic attempt by Bishop Kennedy to negotiate with the earl of Ross; this found some success as the earl of Ross confessed to taking burgh customs from Inverness and destroying crown lands nearby.⁶⁸ Boardman has also interpreted the proceedings of autumn 1464 as a settlement between Earl John, the king’s government and Colin Campbell, earl

⁶³ Macdougall, *James III*, 46-56.

⁶⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 75.

⁶⁵ Macdougall, *James III*, 52-55.

⁶⁶ *R.P.S.*, 1464/1/9. Date accessed: 29 August 2015; *Auchinleck Chronicle*, 170 (f. 120r-f. 120v); *E.R.*, vii, xxxix-xl, 20; Macdougall, ‘Achilles Heel?’, 257.

⁶⁷ *R.M.S.*, ii, nos. 800-805.

⁶⁸ *E.R.*, vii, 296-297; Macdougall, ‘Achilles Heel?’, 257.

of Argyll, over the lordship of Lorn.⁶⁹ However, any success made in negotiating with the earl of Ross was limited by Bishop Kennedy's death on 24 May 1465,⁷⁰ signalling that the king was ripe for new guardianship. On 9 July 1466 the Kennedy faction was the victim of a coup which saw Robert lord Boyd and his son, Thomas, take control of the king's person with the aid of Alexander Boyd of Drumcoll, the king's chamberlain of the royal household and Robert's younger brother; this new Boyd guardianship was made official on 25 October 1466.⁷¹ The Boyds earned the king's enmity when Thomas Boyd was made earl of Arran by February 1467; this was followed by Thomas's marriage to the king's sister, Mary.⁷² The Boyd coup was probably a boon for the earl of Ross and Donald Balloch, since it removed a Kennedy government that had consistently sought to contain the Clan Donald and also removed the earl of Argyll from Arran. Again, factionalism within James III's government proved a great advantage for the earl of Ross in keeping his rivals at bay, but this was not to last. In July 1469 the Boyd government was overthrown by James III,⁷³ eager to assume the reins of power and avenge himself on the Boyds. On 20 November the Boyds were forfeited.⁷⁴ With James III finally ruling in his own right, the earl of Ross was bereft of the advantages that court politics had afforded him for almost a decade.

Aside from Bishop Kennedy's mission in 1461, and the later 1464 court circuit to Inverness, the successive minority governments of James III seemed to have neglected further direct dialogue with the earl of Ross since they were preoccupied with either navigating the Lancastrian/Yorkist war in England, or fighting to survive the other factions eager to claim hold of the young Stewart king. This seemed to have allowed the earl of Ross to extend his own authority in the north, while the failure of the minority governments to reach an equitable arrangement with the earl consequently augmented the mutual mistrust between earl and government. Indeed, the earl of Ross benefited greatly from the minority governments of James III since those in power seemed keen to aggrandise themselves, often at the expense of the earl's rivals.

⁶⁹ Steve Boardman, 'The Tale of Leper John and the Campbell Acquisition of Lorn', in *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edward J. Cowan and R. Andrew McDonald (East Linton, 2000), 219-247, 240-241; Boardman, *Campbells*, 187.

⁷⁰ Watt, 383; C.T. McInnes, 'The Date of the Death of Bishop James Kennedy', *Scottish Historical Review*, 31 (1952), 196; *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 71.

⁷¹ Buchanan, *History*, ii, 188; *R.P.S.*, A1466/1. Date accessed: 29 August 2015; Macdougall, *James III*, 68-71.

⁷² *C.D.S.*, iv, no. 1368; *R.M.S.*, ii, nos. 912-915.

⁷³ Macdougall, *James III*, 82-83.

⁷⁴ *R.P.S.*, A1469/2. Date accessed: 29 August 2015.

The increase in tensions between Earl John and the minority governments of James III filtered downward and unrest was seen throughout the north. The Book of Clanranald states that John, son of Lachlan Maclean of Duart, was killed by Clan Chattan in Ardgour in the same year as Hugh of Sleat's plundering of Orkney.⁷⁵ In the Aird John's matrilinear relatives, the Haliburtons, were demonstrating their own willingness to use the uncomfortable divide between the earl of Ross with neighbouring powers to flex their own regional muscle. In 1462 John Haliburton was involved in a dispute with the abbot of Arbroath who accused him of unlawfully alienating lands in the parish of Inverness.⁷⁶ It was noted by Edmund Batten that John Haliburton was using a title to lands inherited from Alexander Chisholm, and his quarrel with the abbot of Arbroath was based on an agreement from 1322 which the monastery had with Christian of the Aird.⁷⁷ Clearly Haliburton was involved in the affairs of those families which had preceded him in his lands. The Haliburtons were not the only family in the Aird seeking to strengthen their positions in the face of mounting tensions between the king and the earl of Ross. In August 1467 Hugh Rose of Kilravock and the leaders of Clan Chattan struck an agreement of mutual protection with the Forbeses in which both the lord of Kilravock and the chief of Clan Chattan acknowledged their allegiance to John, earl of Ross.⁷⁸

Through all the minority governments it is difficult to determine how the relationship between Earl John and his father-in-law, James Livingstone, had held up since Livingstone had resumed his place in the royal court as king's chamberlain. Livingstone seemed to have been on good terms with Ross in 1461 when they made common cause in defiance of Mary of Gueldres. But the goodwill that had been fostered between Earl John and his father-in-law in the 1450s had probably cooled by 1464 when the earl's wife was complaining publicly of the ill-treatment she received from her husband, who had neglected her for another consort.⁷⁹ Regardless, sometime between April and October 1467 James Livingstone, king's chamberlain, died⁸⁰ depriving Earl John of a long-time contact within the royal court and diminishing his ability to project himself favourably into the king's circle of advisors.

⁷⁵ *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 169.

⁷⁶ *Arb. Lib.*, ii, 138-140.

⁷⁷ Batten, *Charters of the Priory of Beaulieu*, 99.

⁷⁸ *Coll. de Rebus Alban.*, 80-81.

⁷⁹ *C.P.L.*, xi, 671-672.

⁸⁰ Macdougall, *James III*, 75; *R.M.S.*, ii, nos. 912, 932.

New Blood, Old Problems: Changes in an Earldom 1449-1470

The death of Earl Alexander in 1449 left the earldom of Ross and the lordship of the Isles with a new lord who was a minor. The installation of new leadership in the earldom was accompanied by significant changes in the composition of the earl's tenantry and administration, as those men who had made Earl Alexander's lordship in Ross possible reached the end of their own lives. Yet John inherited some of the issues associated with his father's administration of the earldom. As a result, the early years of John's tenure as earl of Ross were characterised by the establishment of new local magnates and the management of pre-existing matters.

In the spring of 1450 the festering unrest underlying the possession of Ferincoskry was resurfacing. On 28 May John Ross, lord of Balnagown, accompanied by Alexander MacCulloch, presented himself before Earl John and the earl's council, which consisted of John Stewart, lord of Lorn, Lachlan MacLean, lord of Duart, William, thane of Cawdor, John MacLean, lord of Coll, and Rolland, son of Alexander, in Dingwall. The object of John Ross was to demonstrate that certain lands in Ferincoskry, called Ospidale and Invercassly, were still legally his possessions. To support his claim he was accompanied by the current tenants, a burgess of Tain named Christian Foras, who had held the land for twenty-four years, and Henry Gray, vicar of Kilmuir, who had held the land for four years.⁸¹ This episode saw John Ross and Alexander MacCulloch collaborating in opposition to their superior. Any apprehension John Ross had towards MacCulloch, a potential challenger to Balnagown's influence in the northeast, was of no consequence when weighed against the benefits the two lords could achieve within the earldom as allies. Perhaps this alliance between Ross of Balnagown and MacCulloch of Plaids was orchestrated by Alexander MacCulloch, just prior to his own death, to protect his son's position in close proximity to the lord of Balnagown.

A few months after these men had challenged Earl John and his council over Ferincoskry, Alexander MacCulloch was dead, and on 10 November 1450 John MacCulloch inherited

⁸¹ NRS GD 297/191; *A.L.I.*, no. 54. The vicarage of Kilmuir was most likely that of the parish of Kilmuir Easter, in close proximity to Balnagown, see Watson, *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, 63. Perhaps Henry Gray was related to an Alexander Gray, who challenged Thomas Tulloch for the ecclesiastical office of treasurer of Ross in 1465, see *C.S.S.R.*, v, nos. 1036, 1040.

the lands of his father as well as being placed in his heritable position as bailie of Tain.⁸² This change in leadership within the MacCullochs was probably viewed with relief by the young earl of Ross because it removed the most powerful man who had stood before his council in support of John Ross over the disputed lands of Ferincoskry six months earlier. There were certainly nuanced politics underlying the retour regarding the MacCulloch inheritance; the installation of a new lord of Plaids was overseen the earl's elder half-brother, Gillespic of the Isles, known in Latin as Celestinus, who appeared in this document as the lieutenant of the earl and deputy sheriff of Inverness.⁸³ Gillespic's importance to Earl John was made clear by this retour. His administrative roles in both Ross and the sheriffdom of Inverness made him second only to the earl; his status as lieutenant to the earl was perhaps a result of the earl's youth, reinforcing the rule of his brother. Gillespic then could project himself as the indispensable man in his brother's lordship in Ross using his jurisdictional powers. Consequently, he could use his offices to cultivate relationships of patronage with the magnates of the earldom. The MacCulloch retour gives a good example of the opportunities Gillespic likely had to build political relationships with the nobility of Ross. Members of the retour consisted of the flower of Easter Ross leadership: John Ross, John Munro, heir to the lord of Foulis, John Tulloch, lord of Easter Aird, and other notables of Easter Ross, while George Munro, lord of Foulis, was involved with the retour, acting in his capacity as bailie.⁸⁴

As noted by Jean and R.W. Munro, the notarial instrument regarding John Ross's claim to lands in Ferincoskry is the only document which records the convocation of John MacDonald's council. But the mismatch of meeting in Dingwall to discuss Ferincoskry compared to the clear majority of men present from the lordship of the Isles makes it difficult to determine what this council represented: a council for the earldom of Ross or for the lordship of the Isles.⁸⁵ Jean Munro suggests this was typical of the lordship of the Isles and suggests an assimilation of Lordship and Earldom councils into a singular administrative structure rather than two separate entities.⁸⁶ Regardless of the identity of the council, the fact that it was assembled to discuss the claims of John Ross to Ferincoskry

⁸² *A.L.I.*, no. 55. *The Calendar of Fearn* gives the year 1460 as the year of Alexander MacCulloch's death, see *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 31. But it seems clear that John MacCulloch began his tenure as lord of Plaids by 1450 given the retour of that year.

⁸³ Gillespic also appears as 'Archibald', see *H.P.*, i, 53-54.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* One member of the retour that stood out as not being a local of Easter Ross was a John MacLeod who had no title in the document but who was possibly the lord of Dunvegan.

⁸⁵ *A.L.I.*, comment to no. 54.

⁸⁶ Munro, 'The Lordship of the Isles', 31.

demonstrated the seriousness of the matter. The lord of Balnagown was challenging the authority of his MacDonald superiors, questioning the actions of two of Earl John's predecessors. The fact that Alexander MacCulloch had thrown in with Balnagown on the matter exacerbated the situation for the earl, since MacCulloch had been Earl Alexander's protégé in controlling the north of the earldom. Seeing his father's loyal vassal join in challenging him was an embarrassment for Earl John.

Further documentation of this confrontation is lacking, and Ferincoskry does not appear in records of the earldom for another fourteen years, perhaps implying that the matter remained unresolved. However, by 1464 Earl John made a decision and on 10 January granted the lands within the earldom of Sutherland which comprised Ferincoskry to his brother Gillespic.⁸⁷ John Ross seemed to settle in well in this new arrangement, and a working relationship between him and the earl began to form. On 4 November 1466 John Ross, lord of Balnagown was witness to a charter of the earl's which dealt with lands in Delny. The lord of Balnagown was accompanied by his kin: his son, Alexander, and his brother, William of Little Allan. Also present was Thomas Dingwall in his capacity as subdean of Ross and the earl's chamberlain.⁸⁸ In any case, Ferincoskry was not long a part of Gillespic's hegemony and handing it over to him signalled the end of Ferincoskry being associated with the earls of Ross. By 1467 the land had made its way into the hands of the earls of Sutherland as part of the marital agreement when Gillespic's daughter was married to the earl of Sutherland.⁸⁹

The Ferincoskry grant was a calculated move on the part of the earl. Giving Gillespic control of Ferincoskry effectively quashed any attempt by the lord of Balnagown to revive his own claims that had caused so much tension, and could have been an attempt to place a reliable and enforceable buffer between the two feuding kindreds of Ross and MacKay while projecting MacDonald power into Sutherland and Caithness. Gillespic was arguably the most powerful man in his brother's hegemony.

Gillespic's influence in Ross extended far beyond Ferincoskry, as the most spectacular grants made by the earl were to his elder half-brother. By 6 December 1457 he was titled

⁸⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 82.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 87. For discussion on Thomas Dingwall; see below, 199-200.

⁸⁹ Fraser, *Sutherland*, i, 66-67. Sir Robert Gordon's account gives an alternative tradition that the earl of Sutherland married the daughter of the earl of Ross rather than the daughter of Gillespic; see Gordon, *Sutherland*, 75. This discrepancy was noted by Jean and R.W. Munro; see *A.L.I.*, commentary to no. 82.

‘of Lochalsh’.⁹⁰ By 22 April 1461 Gillespic appears as lord of Lochalsh, had been promoted from his position as deputy sheriff of Inverness to sheriff of Inverness, was still using the title ‘lieutenant of the earl’, and was engaged in overseeing another retour, this time concerned with the inheritance of the lands of the two Cadbolls in the earldom of Ross to William of Clyne after the death of his grandfather, another William of Clyne.⁹¹ In his capacity as sheriff of Inverness, Gillespic could exercise widespread administrative powers over the earldom. He had the ability to draw together the local nobility of Ross and to interact closely with them; this was complimented by his position as right-hand of the earl, as seen by the two surviving retours over which he presided. Among the witnesses in both of Gillespic’s retours were the leadership of the Rosses of Balnagown, the Munros of Foulis and John Tulloch, lord of Easter Aird.⁹²

The power Gillespic held in Ross and the sheriffdom of Inverness was reinforced by Earl John’s land grants to his half-brother. By 2 February 1463 Earl John was in Dingwall, where he addressed issues concerning the westernmost lands within the earldom: Lochbroom, Lochcarron, Lochalsh, Kishorn and Torridon. All of these the earl granted, with the consent of his council, to his natural brother, Gillespic, and to the heirs of Gillespic by Finvola, daughter of MacLean of Duart.⁹³ On 8 November Gillespic obtained the lands of Sleat; this was a purely Isles affair in terms of witnesses but was also negotiated in Dingwall.⁹⁴ Gillespic may have had title to some of these lands earlier. According to the *Sleat History* Gillespic received Lochbroom, Lochcarron, Lochalsh, and lands in the Braes of Ross from his father, but it demonstrates its own confusion when it names Gillespic’s father as being Earl John.⁹⁵ Lochalsh, at least, seems to have been granted to Gillespic during his brother’s lordship, sometime after the 1450 retour he oversaw when he only featured as the deputy sheriff of Inverness and lieutenant of the earl,⁹⁶ and the earliest record of him being ‘of Lochalsh’ in 1457.⁹⁷

⁹⁰ *A.L.I.*, no. 128.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 71.

⁹² *Ibid.*, nos. 55, 71. The lordship of Easter Aird was located in the Tarbat area in Ross, not to be confused with the barony of the Aird.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, no. 76; *R.M.S.*, ii, 806.

⁹⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 80. Gillespic’s control of Sleat was fleeting; it was later granted by Earl John to his other brother, Hugh, on 28 June 1469, see *ibid.*, no. 96.

⁹⁵ *H.P.*, i, 54.

⁹⁶ See above, 195. In his second known retour conducted on 22 April 1461, Gillespic was titled as lord of Lochalsh as well as sheriff of Inverness and lieutenant of the earl.

⁹⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 128.

It seems the grants by Earl John are the first that survive regarding significant Ross territory being given to another member of Clan Donald and to a magnate of the lordship of the Isles. Therefore, it is more likely that Gillespic's original grants of Ross lands were issued by Earl John, his brother, rather than by their father. This was a discernable shift from previous MacDonald policy which hesitated to grant such large portions of land to Islesmen. Perhaps this grant indicated an altering of perceptions during the period. There do not seem to have been any negative reactions to Gillespic's incredible land accumulation from the nobles of Ross, and as with Ferincoskry, it seems the earl deliberately installed his brother as a 'marcher lord' across much of west and northwest Ross, protecting the integrity of the earldom. Indeed, his position as the earl's lieutenant might have signified Gillespic's complete dominance of Ross outside the core of Easter Ross. It may have been that the MacDonald earls had so successfully integrated themselves into Ross as to be perceived as protectors by the magnates of Easter Ross. At the very least, the rest of Ross had been integrated into the political sphere of the Isles; those in the witness list of the 1463 charter to Gillespic were all men from the lordship of the Isles.⁹⁸ On 25 April 1467 Earl John further increased the possessions of his brother Gillespic with the consent of his council, again consisting only of men of the Isles, granting him the lands of Strathhalladale in the earldom of Caithness.⁹⁹ Having land in Caithness probably enhanced Gillespic's role as guardian of northern Ross.

Gillespic's land grants placed him adjacent to the lord of Balnagown's lands of Westray, Strathcarron and Strathoykell, and as superior over several other magnates of Easter Ross. His possession of Lochbroom made him superior over John Munro, lord of Foulis, who held the land of Innerlayoun in Lochbroom parish.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the *Sleat History* states that the lordship of Kildun was also added to Gillespic's lands in Ross at the same time he received Lochbroom, Lochcarron and Lochalsh in 1463.¹⁰¹ While no contemporary document confirms this, a special bond of friendship between the Dingwalls of Kildun and Gillespic's grandson, Donald of Lochalsh did exist in the early sixteenth century.¹⁰² It is possible this later alliance had its roots in Gillespic's own rise in Ross and subsequent patronage extended to Ross locals. In fact, charter evidence indicates Gillespic's rise to

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, comment to no. 76.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 89.

¹⁰⁰ *Munro Writs*, 3, no. 8.

¹⁰¹ *H.P.*, i, 54.

¹⁰² See below, 227-228.

prominence in Ross was concurrent with the rise in position of the Dingwall kindred in the earldom through Thomas Dingwall, subdean of Ross.

Thomas Dingwall had received papal dispensation to the vicarage of Dingwall and also received the chapel of St. Laurence in Dingwall Castle, presented to him by Earl Alexander in January 1445.¹⁰³ His proximity to Earl Alexander, and then Earl John, in this position allowed him to gain enough prestige to become subdean of Ross by 3 October 1456¹⁰⁴ and he was the rector of Kilchoman in Islay until 1463.¹⁰⁵ These successes were accompanied by the accumulation of land in Ross. On 4 October 1451 he was granted the Dingwall mill and the mill lands by the burgesses of Dingwall,¹⁰⁶ and continued to amass other lands throughout the 1450s, receiving patronage from the lord of Foulis.¹⁰⁷ Dingwall's prominence was firmly established by the 1460s and he began to be seen in important earldom documents. He was present, as the subdean of Ross, at the retour of the land of Cadboll overseen by Gillespie on 22 April 1461 in Dingwall.¹⁰⁸

In 1463 Thomas Dingwall was making a spectacular rise which would place the Dingwalls as one of the leading kindred in Ross. On 18 February 1463, the same month that the earl granted his brother Gillespie the huge portions of Wester Ross, Earl John was in Delny, a traditional seat of power in the earldom. Here the earl commanded John Munro, lord of Foulis, and Duncan Munro, acting as his bailies, to give sasine of the liferent of Inchfuir, in Easter Kilmuir, to Thomas Dingwall; he was a man highly valued by the earl, who held the positions of chamberlain to the earl and subdean of Ross.¹⁰⁹ Just as his father had elevated the position of the MacCullochs of Plaids, Earl John increased the fortunes of the Dingwalls. Thomas Dingwall's real power was not in the lands he was granted, but rather in his capacity as the man who controlled the finances of the earldom. Two months later, on 12 April, Dingwall was being called the earl's chamberlain and treasurer when he was granted the liferent of the lands of Ussie in Ross, a grant confirmed by the king on 14 August 1464.¹¹⁰ Dingwall's authority in the earldom was augmented by the earl's

¹⁰³ *C.S.S.R.*, iv, no. 1140; *C.P.L.*, ix, 464-465.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 328-329.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, xi, 480.

¹⁰⁶ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 325-326.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 327-328, 330-331.

¹⁰⁸ *A.L.I.*, no. 71.

¹⁰⁹ *A.L.I.*, no. 77.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 78; *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 801.

confidence in assigning him to act as bailie while the earl was absent. While in Mull on 30 May 1468, Earl John ordered John MacCulloch and Thomas Dingwall to give a parcel of land in Tain to build a mill for the benefit of the chapel of St. Duthac in Tain.¹¹¹ Curiously Thomas Dingwall was also called bailie of Tain on this occasion; possibly he shared the responsibility of Tain with John MacCulloch by this date, or perhaps Thomas Dingwall functioned as an overseer of the earldom's administration when Earl John was absent in the Hebrides.

These actions by Earl John in altering the administrative landscape of Ross were signs that he was interested in bolstering his capacity to rule effectively in the earldom. Perhaps one of the earl's charters in the winter of 1467 demonstrated his desire to tie himself to the earldom more closely when he used his position as earl of Ross to act as patron to Fearn Abbey. While in Dingwall on 2 November, he confirmed the lands given to the abbey by Earl Farquhar in the thirteenth century, and tied his confirmation to the salvation of the souls of his father and mother.¹¹² In addition to the perfunctory act of patronage, this was a political calculation at a time when his influence had been severely curtailed and he needed to show himself as still capable of guarding the interests of Ross. The symbolic nature of the document was to demonstrate John as heir to Farquhar's legacy as well as that of his own father.

The advent of a new MacCulloch lord of Plaids in 1450 may have been a fortunate boon for the young earl of Ross, but three years later a less fortuitous loss for the earl's administration occurred. Earl John's first known act was to strengthen his family's control over Ross on 13 August 1449 by granting his uncle-in-law, Alexander of Dunbeath, the lands of Easter Kindeace in Nigg parish, which had been resigned by Thomas Fenton.¹¹³ For implementation of this grant the earl relied on his bailie, the lord of Foulis, George Munro.¹¹⁴ However, reliance on this loyal retainer was not to last long. George Munro, lord of Foulis, one of the great supporters in Ross of the MacDonalds, was killed in battle in 1452.¹¹⁵ On 4 August 1453 Earl John granted the Foulis possessions to John Munro, George's son.¹¹⁶ The loss of George Munro was acute as it robbed John of a man whom his

¹¹¹ *A.L.I.*, no. 95.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, no. 90; *Clan Donald*, i, 541-543.

¹¹³ *A.L.I.*, no. 51.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 52.

¹¹⁵ *Munro Tree*, 9, M.

¹¹⁶ *A.L.I.*, no. 56; *Munro Writs*, 6, no. 19.

father had relied upon to handle affairs in Ross. His death meant that the earl's primary bailie within the earldom of Ross was no longer available. Within a two-year period of John's early career, two of the leading noblemen of Ross had perished, men who had been key administrators in the earldom for his father.

Unlike Alexander MacCulloch, there is no indication that George Munro ever confronted the earl directly, and it seems Earl John continued to use the Munros to conduct administrative affairs within the earldom of Ross; Earl John assigned the job of giving sasine to the new lord of Foulis to John Munro's kinsman, Hugh Munro, another one of Earl John's bailies.¹¹⁷ However, although the Munros of Foulis seem to have avoided direct confrontation with the MacDonald earls, their earlier dealings with the Douglasses could have been a cause for concern as the earldom passed to the young Earl John. The extent of the area covered by the Munros in their capacity as bailies is unclear, but in 1381 the lord of Foulis had been titled bailie of Avoch.¹¹⁸ There is a strong possibility that this was one of the hereditary administrative areas assigned to the Munro bailies by 1453. This would have placed the Munros in the interesting position of being tenants of the earls of Ross for their own extensive territories centred on Foulis, but being administrative agents for the Douglas barony of Avoch, which had been incorporated into the earldom of Ormond by 1445. Further complicating Munro loyalties was the land of Findon, in the barony of Avoch, that the Munros had held since Hugh, earl of Ross granted it to them in the early fourteenth century.¹¹⁹ This division in administrative loyalties could have been an additional issue throughout the 1440s and 1450s, as they increasingly had to balance their feudal obligations to the MacDonald earls of Ross with that of the neighbouring Douglas earl of Ormond.

Nevertheless, the administrative territory over which the Munros of Foulis governed seems to have been greatly increased during the tenure of the MacDonald earls of Ross, though it is difficult to judge when and at what pace the lords of Foulis accumulated this power. Unlike 1381 when Avoch was stipulated as the territory over which the Munros held administrative jurisdiction, the mentions of their jurisdiction as bailies under the MacDonald earls of Ross were vague. However, by 1463 John Munro, lord of Foulis, had the title 'principali ballivo nostro Rossie' while his kinsman, Duncan Munro, was named

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *Munro Writs*, 5, no. 14.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., no. 2, 1-2.

as substitute bailie,¹²⁰ demonstrating the prominence Munro received from Earl John. The expansion of the administrative duties of the lord of Foulis under Earl John clearly encompassed the majority of Easter Ross. The Munros served the earl in other administrative functions as well, including affairs inherent to the lordship of the Isles. On 28 June 1469 a Thomas Munro, rector of Kilmonivaig, held the post of earl's secretary while the earl was in Aros with his council, reaching an arrangement concerning his estranged brother, Hugh, securing Hugh's lands which now included Sleat. The charter dictated Hugh's possession would pass to the progeny of Hugh's wife Finvola, the daughter of MacIain of Ardnamurchan.¹²¹

Orchestrating the Dunbeath/Cawdor Alliance

As already noted, Earl John's first recorded act was one which addressed an issue of importance to the deceased Earl Alexander: the securing of the fortunes of Alexander of Dunbeath. On 13 August 1449 Earl John granted Alexander Sutherland of Dunbeath the lands of Easter Kindeace in Nigg parish within the earldom of Ross, which had been resigned by Thomas Fenton of Ogil, a kinsman to the lord of Beaufort.¹²² Interestingly, this Thomas Fenton also held lands in the parish of Tannadice, St. Andrews diocese.¹²³ This parish had of course been a part of the extensive holdings of Thomas Tulloch between 1437 and 1440, before he became the bishop of Ross.¹²⁴ This charter signalled Earl John's adherence to his late father's arrangements with Dunbeath in 1439,¹²⁵ signalling that he was beginning his lordship through continuance of his father's policies. The main administrative agent tasked with giving sasine of Easter Kindeace to Alexander of Dunbeath was the lord of Foulis, George Munro.¹²⁶ This was strange since both MacCulloch of Plaids and Ross of Balnagown were perhaps more suitable choices to act as bailies in the area of Dunbeath's new acquisition. If the MacCullochs and the Rosses were

¹²⁰ *A.L.I.*, no. 77.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, no. 96. Since Gillespie, lord of Lochalsh, had held Sleat in 1464, it seems he had willingly given up Sleat in order to repair relations in the Clan Donald ranks. However, since the charter dictated that only the heirs of Finvola would inherit, this document alienated Hugh's son, Donald Gallda.

¹²² *A.L.I.*, no. 51. There is an incomplete English translation of this document in *Invernessiana*, 116.

¹²³ *A.L.I.*, no. 51 comment.

¹²⁴ *C.S.S.R.*, iv, 378a, 378b, 386, 398, 676, 681, 687.

¹²⁵ *A.L.I.*, no. 29.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 52.

being sidelined by Earl John it could have been due to the growing discontent John Ross, lord of Balnagown, was displaying over the land of Ferincoskry.

Alexander Sutherland was probably dead soon after 15 November 1456 when he gave his will and testament at Roslin, in which he named Earl John as a guardian of his interests.¹²⁷ Earl John seemed to have used this position to orchestrate a marital alliance between Mary Sutherland and William the younger, son of William, thane of Cawdor. On 19 September 1458 Earl John ordered John Munro, lord of Foulis, to give Mary Sutherland sasine of Easter Kindeace.¹²⁸ Two days later William the younger of Cawdor appeared with Mary in a precept concerning the same land.¹²⁹ It is probable that they were married around this time; the interests of the Mary Sutherland and the thane of Cawdor were aligned. This was an important marital alliance for the earl. William, thane of Cawdor, had inherited his lands under the aegis of Earl John's father and had been an important adherent to Earl Alexander. His continued importance to Earl John was highlighted by his inclusion in the earl's council in 1450, when he was the only member who was not based in the lordship of the Isles.¹³⁰

The need to keep the thane of Cawdor and his heir closely tied to the earl was made evident as the thanes received the patronage of James II, playing a significant role as royal agents in Moray and Badenoch. During the period when the king and his supporters were wiping out the Black Douglasses, the thane of Cawdor was one of the premier nobles in the north enforcing the king's will. On 6 August 1454 James II granted to his 'beloved squire' permission to fortify Cawdor as a response to the events of the Douglas rebellion.¹³¹ Then, on 5 March 1456, William of Cawdor was given commission by James II to raze Lochindorb and destroy Douglas support in that area.¹³² More importantly, the thane of Cawdor was the king's chamberlain north of the Spey and was in charge of issuing and collecting the fermes in lands pertinent to the earl and his adherents. In particular Gillespic, lord of Lochalsh, relied on William, thane of Cawdor, to provide him with the fermes of Redcastle in 1457 and 1458.¹³³ Royal patronage to the thane of Cawdor held a potential

¹²⁷ *Bannatyne Misc.*, iii, 91-102, especially at 97.

¹²⁸ *A.L.I.*, no. 67.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 68.

¹³⁰ See above, 194.

¹³¹ *Cawdor Bk.*, 20-21.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 19, 29-30, 35; *E.R.*, vi, 373, 459.

threat to the earl of Ross since it could subvert the earl's role as William of Cawdor's superior and his value as sheriff of Nairn.

The efforts of Earl John to keep William of Cawdor close were made easier by the king during the 1460s. During James III's visit to Inverness in 1464, Dunbeath was granted to an Elizabeth Dunbar.¹³⁴ This was possibly the daughter of James Dunbar, earl of Moray who had been the wife of Archibald Douglas, earl of Moray.¹³⁵ After her husband's death in 1455 this lady married the second earl of Huntly,¹³⁶ and it may have been at the behest of Huntly that the king interfered with the Dunbeath inheritance. Despite all previous efforts to secure Dunbeath, Earl John was unable to transfer that protection to his cousin, Mary Sutherland. The king probably caught the earl of Ross off guard, since two years earlier King James had given his consent to Mary's inheritance of Dunbeath.¹³⁷ This act by the king must have been irksome to the earl; Dunbeath had been a part of the MacDonald hegemony since 1439 when Alexander MacDonald had pledged to defend it for Alexander Sutherland.¹³⁸

The earl could not have been alone in his annoyance with the king over the loss of Dunbeath. To the thane of Cawdor this was a slap in the face, as the inheritance of his son's wife was stripped from them. Despite the setback of losing Dunbeath, the earl of Ross was determined to salvage what he could from the Dunbeath/Cawdor union, and support his kinswoman. On 6 November 1467 the earl granted Invermarkie in Badenoch to his new cousin by marriage, William the younger of Cawdor, and his wife Mary Sutherland; this was done with the consent of John's council which included John Munro, lord of Foulis, and the earl's chamberlain and subdean of Ross, Thomas Dingwall.¹³⁹ This latest demonstration of patronage by the earl to the heir of Cawdor could have been a response to the loss of Dunbeath. In doing so the earl could have hoped to secure Cawdor's loyalties in supporting the earl's position in Badenoch.

On 27 March 1468 John, earl of Ross, was busy settling the Cawdor inheritance after the death of William, thane of Cawdor. The earl ordered his chamberlain, Thomas Dingwall,

¹³⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 84.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, comment.

¹³⁶ *S.P.*, iv, 527-528; vi, 310.

¹³⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 83.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 29.

¹³⁹ *A.L.I.*, no. 91; for the precept of sasine for this act see *A.L.I.*, no. 92.

and William Fleming, burgess of Nairn, to give sasine of Cawdor lands in the sheriffdom of Nairn and the office of sheriff of Nairn to William the younger.¹⁴⁰ On the same day the earl ordered John Munro to give lands of the two Kinkells on the Black Isle within the earldom of Ross to William the younger of Cawdor.¹⁴¹ The earl's cousin by marriage was now the sheriff of Nairn, and controlled significant lands in Moray and Badenoch. Earl John's objective in tying his cousin's fate to Cawdor may have been similar to the role played by his half-brother, Gillespie of Lochalsh, in the northwest: to gain a reliable lieutenant able to provide stability for the earldom's periphery in the southeast.

Church Relations

In 1449 the earldom of Ross experienced a change in leadership. Having John MacDonald as the new young earl of Ross signalled that the status quo in the church of Ross was potentially ripe for change. Already before the death of Earl Alexander, alliances were being formed to press for ecclesiastical offices in the diocese of Ross. In January 1449 Laurence Piot, archdeacon of Aberdeen, was working with the lord of Balnagown and the lord of Foulis on behalf of the interests of William Ross, kinsman to Ross of Balnagown, to litigate for benefices in Ross and Moray.¹⁴² This must have concerned Bishop Tulloch, who was seeing his most prominent enemies joining together with Balnagown to pursue ecclesiastic advancement without any restraint being imposed by an authoritative earl.

Direct confrontation with the Tullochs occurred in the autumn of 1454 when the pope commanded the abbot of Fearn and two canons of Ross, William Urquhart and Thomas Dingwall, to remove Thomas Tulloch, the treasurer of the diocese, from his office, which he had held without legal right for ten to eleven years, and assign it to John Kennethson [MacKenzie?].¹⁴³ These were important men acting against Tulloch. The abbot during this time was Finlay MacFaid. Finlay seems to have been a popular abbot, and a strong adherent of the MacDonald earls of Ross, particularly when he received an important grant from Earl John confirming the lands of the monastery of Fearn on 2 November 1467.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *A.L.I.*, no. 93; *Cawdor Bk.*, 51-52.

¹⁴¹ *A.L.I.*, no. 94. It is interesting how the new thane of Cawdor's lands were neatly segregated for administrative purposes. John Munro was charged with the sasine of lands in the earldom of Ross while Thomas Dingwall was tasked the same for those lands outside. Again, the lord of Balnagown was conspicuously absent from being involved in administrative duties.

¹⁴² NRS GD 297/215.

¹⁴³ *C.P.L.*, x, 684-685.

¹⁴⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 90, Appendix C, 258-259; *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 38; *Chron. Ross*, 17.

Dingwall's ties to the earl were even more apparent. That the task of removing Treasurer Tulloch was assigned to these two men was particularly threatening to the bishop, as it hinted at the stance taken by the earl of Ross. Both Thomas Tullochs - the bishop and the treasurer - were in precarious positions. This was just the beginning in a long drawn out battle to remove the treasurer from his office. However, the defence of the treasurer and of the larger Tulloch patrimony in Ross was complicated by another infraction caused by the bishop. Bishop Tulloch was once again excommunicated, but again he could not resist demonstrating that his excommunication would not halt his continuing his activities as bishop despite the illegitimacy of his actions. By October 1455 he had collated and provided for a new precentor despite his excommunication.¹⁴⁵

It is possible that these problems were compounded by the risk that Tulloch secular interests were also in jeopardy. John Tulloch, lord of Easter Aird, in the parish of Tarbat, and presumably a kinsman to the Tullochs who controlled the diocese, was active in the affairs of the earldom, being noted in documents in 1450 and 1461.¹⁴⁶ John Tulloch resigned his lordship of Easter Aird into the hands of the earl, and subsequently on 12 April 1463 Earl John granted the lordship of Easter Aird to Donald Corbett, John Tulloch's father-in-law. Donald Corbett's charter specifically stated that only if he had no heirs would Easter Aird be passed on to the progeny of his daughter and John Tulloch.¹⁴⁷ Curiously, the first witness in this document was Finlay, the abbot of Fearn, the same man who had been ordered to strip Thomas Tulloch, the treasurer of the diocese, of his office. Another witness was John Munro, lord of Foulis, whose clan had been at odds with Bishop Tulloch since the 1440s, when the Munros had struggled with Tulloch to obtain the bishopric.¹⁴⁸ With prominent witnesses to this charter active in opposing the bishop, John Tulloch's resignation of his lordship seems to have been connected to the attack on the bishop.

Yet despite these setbacks the bishop of Ross managed to retain practical power in Ross. Indeed, Thomas Tulloch was not content with his own diocese; he continuously was involved in expanding his family's grasp on ecclesiastical offices in other sees. In January

¹⁴⁵ *C.P.L.*, xi, 257.

¹⁴⁶ *A.L.I.*, nos. 55, 71. The nature of John Tulloch's relationship to the Tullochs who controlled the diocese is unknown, but it seems reasonable to speculate a kinship existed.

¹⁴⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 79.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

1456 he installed his kinsman William Tulloch as treasurer of Caithness.¹⁴⁹ A more blatant demonstration of the bishop's influence in northern Scotland occurred when he became embroiled in another feud, this time with the prior of Pluscarden over control of the priory of Urquhart. At the end of January the pope ordered clerics from Aberdeen to judge the matter because, according to the prior of Pluscarden, no competent judges could be found closer at hand except in Caithness, but the population there proved too dangerous to allow the prior to traverse the region safely.¹⁵⁰ The prior's hesitation to trust the local judges near Urquhart and his fear of travelling up to, and through, Caithness might indicate the powerful position the bishop of Ross had accumulated over the clergy of northern Scotland, making it impossible for the prior of Pluscarden to find, in his mind, equitable treatment.

The deanery of Ross was an office which also attracted those politically close to the earl. By April 1457 John of Cawdor was dead and the office of dean was vacant. This spawned no less than six different candidates jockeying for the office. The first man who claimed the deanery was William Ogilvy, who obtained provision on 11 April.¹⁵¹ Yet Ogilvy was not to hold the deanery, but instead supplicated to have papal permission to resign or exchange it on 31 May.¹⁵² The indecision associated with Ogilvy's provision encouraged others to stake their own claims. The first of these was Thomas Vaus; on 18 May he requested to be installed in the office.¹⁵³ However, David Stewart, son of the earl of Mar, had received papal provision to the deanery by 21 May through the support of Bishop Tulloch.¹⁵⁴ This was the same David Stewart who had tried to gain the office in 1445.¹⁵⁵ Just as Earl Alexander had been wary of this man, Earl John was probably also displeased by the prospect of the son of his family's enemy exercising authority in Ross, particularly if Bishop Tulloch was behind the appointment. Unfortunately for both Vaus and Stewart, William Ogilvy used his license to resign the deanery to exchange it with his relative, David Ogilvy, although he only held the office for a year before dying sometime before 21

¹⁴⁹ *C.P.L.*, xi, 246-247.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹⁵² *C.S.S.R.*, v, no. 645.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, no. 636. Watt believed that the surname 'Ross' was an incorrect interpretation in the supplication and instead believed that this was the same man as Thomas de Vaus who was provided to the deanery the following year, see Watt, *Fasti*, 354-355.

¹⁵⁴ *C.S.S.R.*, v, no. 641.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, iv, no. 1261.

October 1458.¹⁵⁶ The luckless Thomas Vaus, still trying hold on to the deanery, seems to have been tied down in legal struggles which lasted until at least 1466.¹⁵⁷

Although other offices within the church of Ross were being fought over, the focus of these quarrels was still to push out the Tullochs. Both Earl Alexander and his son Earl John had to contend with the irascible cleric, Thomas Tulloch, who feared neither secular nor spiritual superiors. He suffered excommunication no less than three times, once while dean of Ross and twice while bishop. Such a man was difficult for the earls of Ross to work with, especially since their important tenants, the Dingwalls, Rosses and the Munros, competed with the Tullochs for religious offices in the diocese. It is telling that Bishop Tulloch did not feature as a witness in any of the charters of either Earl Alexander or Earl John. Moreover no other Tulloch in ecclesiastical office appeared in the secular documents of the MacDonald earls. Instead, the earls relied on the Munros and Dingwalls to supply their administrative clergy.

Upon the death of Thomas Tulloch, bishop of Ross, in 1461,¹⁵⁸ factions immediately began to dismantle the bishop's works. The focus of these efforts was to remove Thomas Tulloch, treasurer of Ross, from his position. It had been more than a decade since Tulloch's appointment to the office of treasurer was contended by Lancelot Ross and John 'Kennethson', but dissatisfaction with the appointment still rankled among those who opposed Tulloch power. In September 1465 this discontent took form when Alexander Gray, clerk of Moray, challenged the right of Tulloch to hold the office of treasurer by claiming Tulloch lived in sin with a pregnant woman and her children.¹⁵⁹ Within the same month Gray also accused Tulloch of being a 'notorious manslayer' and continuing in his usual activities despite excommunication.¹⁶⁰

Forfeiture and the Line of Lochalsh 1470-1513

The end of James III's minority in 1469 signalled the end of Earl John's security deriving from weak royal authority. This was compounded by the loss of his Livingstone links. As James III sought to consolidate his rule in his own right, the earl of Ross was an obvious

¹⁵⁶ *C.P.L.*, xi, 375-376.

¹⁵⁷ *C.S.S.R.*, v, nos. 1068, 1077.

¹⁵⁸ Watt, *Fasti*, 349.

¹⁵⁹ *C.S.S.R.*, v, no. 1036.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1040.

target. But before attacking the earl of Ross James III chose an easier target, his old mentor, the earl of Orkney and Caithness. On 17 September 1470 William Sinclair resigned the earldom of Orkney to the king.¹⁶¹

After gaining control of Orkney, James III was in a far stronger position to deal with the earl of Ross. Norman Macdougall believed James III must have known about the Ardtornish treaty of 1462 long before he actually took action against the earl of Ross in 1475, because the sheer number of individuals who were party to the treaty rendered it impossible to keep it secret; John's estranged wife, Elisabeth Livingstone, was a likely source of such information.¹⁶² However, successive minority governments had more pressing priorities, and even when James III assumed control himself he seems to have been wary of Gillespic, lord of Lochalsh.

Unfortunately for Earl John, the protection his half-brother seems to have disappeared when Gillespic died, probably by 1473.¹⁶³ Both Boardman and Macdougall suggest that the death of Gillespic signalled to King James III that the earl of Ross had lost his right arm and chief ally.¹⁶⁴ If so, Gillespic seems to have been the real deterrent that protected Earl John's earldom from royal wrath despite the earl's negotiations with England; while Gillespic lived, the king perceived the MacDonalds as strong, but Gillespic's death made the MacDonald hegemony vulnerable. By the end of 1475 the king was ready to act against the earl of Ross and a list of charges was created, which included treasonable dealings with the English and giving his son, Angus Og, control of Inverness and Nairn. The earl was ordered to answer for these charges and present himself to parliament; when John MacDonald failed to appear the government pronounced the forfeiture of the earldom of Ross on 5 December 1475,¹⁶⁵ in what Norman Macdougall has described as unfinished royal business dating from the 1450s.¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the death of the lord of Lochalsh did not mean that the earl's position immediately deteriorated, or that the Ross nobility were willing to withdraw their

¹⁶¹ *R.M.S.*, ii, nos. 996-1002. For analysis of James III's centralising legislation and the Scoto-Danish reasons for this Orkney's resignation see; MacDougall, *James III*, 88-93.

¹⁶² Macdougall, *James III*, 127.

¹⁶³ *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 211; *H.P.*, i, 53-54; One source states Gillespic's death did not occur until 1476, see *Clan Donald*, iii, 466. But the 1473 date seems to be accepted by most scholarship.

¹⁶⁴ Boardman, *Campbells*, 205-206; MacDougall, *James III*, 127.

¹⁶⁵ *RPS*, 1475/26, 1475/27, 1475/28, 1475/29, 1475/30. Date accessed: 19 May 2015.

¹⁶⁶ Macdougall, *James III*, 127.

allegiance. On the contrary, on 6 February 1475 John Ross of Balnagown and his son, Alexander, entered into an indenture with Hector MacLean of Lochbuie by which John's grandson, David, would marry Hector's daughter, Margaret. This agreement was overseen by John, earl of Ross, and certain members of his council. The lord of Balnagown did not have his seal present and instead the seal of the Munro lord of Foulis was substituted. The family of Dingwall was also represented in the witness list of this agreement, namely Thomas Dingwall, the chamberlain of Ross and subdean, and his kinsman, Master John Dingwall.¹⁶⁷ The Munros had been firm allies of the lords of Balnagown, and the presence of the lord of Foulis is not surprising. The Dingwalls too had shown their commitment to the Rosses of Balnagown at Bealach nam Brog, and had been one of the key families in Ross administering the earldom for the MacDonald earls. This marriage agreement may have demonstrated the continued loyalty the lord of Balnagown held towards his MacDonald earl, despite the weakened position of the latter. By committing to a marriage with Hector MacLean, a strong supporter of the earl, John Ross signalled his continued political alignment with Earl John regardless of the royal antipathy for Clan Donald.

This indenture confirmed that Ross of Balnagown still held Strathoykell in 1475. Since the lord of Balnagown put up part of the monetary value of Strathoykell as insurance against the terms of the indenture not being fulfilled, the emphasis of this arrangement could have been a reaction to the death of Gillespie of Lochalsh to secure the western territories of Ross. This cannot be a coincidence, as tensions between the clans Mackay and Ross arising from the old feud over Ferincoskry had never healed. It is also possible that MacLean wanted the support of Clan Ross in maintaining his foothold in Urquhart. Hector MacLean had been granted the lands of Urquhart by Earl Alexander by at least 1440, when Hector appeared using the title of *Senescallum* of Urquhart.¹⁶⁸ But the castle of Urquhart was in the hands of Thomas Ogilvy in 1450 and 1451, held directly of the king.¹⁶⁹ An alliance with Hector MacLean then would have seen the lord of Balnagown aid MacLean maintain a foothold in Urquhart.

However, Jean and R.W. Munro note that there is no proof of David Ross's marriage to Margaret MacLean having taken place, and that David Ross married Helen Keith

¹⁶⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 104.

¹⁶⁸ *Family of Rose*, 131.

¹⁶⁹ *E.R.*, v, 380, 405, 421, 441. The separation of Urquhart Castle from its associated lands was noted in Mackay, *Urquhart and Glenmoriston*, 55.

sometime before 1490.¹⁷⁰ Without evidence it is difficult to determine why David Ross did not marry Margaret MacLean. It is plausible that in the wake of the death of Alexander Ross, who was killed at the battle of Allt a' Charais in 1487 defending Ross lands from raiding Mackays,¹⁷¹ the marital agreement between the Rosses and MacLeans fell apart. If so, it seems Alexander Ross was a key supporter of a union with the MacLeans. With Alexander's death John Ross made different arrangements for his grandson, and avoided an attachment with a family strongly involved in the inner circle of the lordship of the Isles. Of course, relations between the Rosses of Balnagown and their Hebridean allies could have soured prior to the death of Alexander Ross. Earl John's forfeiture of his earldom could have reduced the desirability of the match, or the battle of Allt a' Charais itself could have indicated a breakdown of congenial ties with the Lordship of the Isles. However, a longstanding feud with the Mackays of Strathnaver over Ferincoskry does not necessarily indicate a larger quarrel with other chiefs in the Hebrides.

Post-Forfeiture Reorganisation of Ross

John's forfeiture of Ross necessitated that the landholders in Ross scramble for royal regrants of their lands. Understandably, the year 1476 was filled with various nobles in Ross resigning their lands into the king's hands and seeking re-confirmation of their positions. The first case was that of the John MacDonald's estranged wife, the countess of Ross, who was favourably treated by the king in the aftermath of the forfeiture. On 8 February she received large swathes of land within the earldom of Ross that included Balnagown.¹⁷² One curiosity in the regranting of lands was the absence of charters to the important men in Easter Ross. There are no surviving charters to Ross of Balnagown, Munro of Foulis, MacCulloch of Plaids or the Dingwalls of Kildun. The lordship of Balnagown was included in the king's provision to the countess of Ross, thereby making John Ross the tenant of the countess for his primary lordship, while his other extensive lands throughout the earldom were presumably held directly of the crown.

The countess was also given large portions of Ross patrimony outside the earldom. She continued to hold Greenan in Ayr, the baronial lands of Kingedward with the associated church patronages in Buchan, and the annual rent of Cawdor in Moray.¹⁷³ However, her

¹⁷⁰ *A.L.I.*, comment to no. 104; *R.M.S.*, ii, 1982.

¹⁷¹ *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 40; *Wardlaw*, 114-115; Gordon, *Sutherland*, 78-79.

¹⁷² *R.M.S.*, ii, 1227; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A19.

¹⁷³ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1227; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A19.

tenure of Kingedward was compromised when on 15 July 1476 the king defined what John MacDonald was allowed to keep; one surprise was that the lord of the Isles was to be allowed to keep the barony of Kingedward.¹⁷⁴

Other Ross lands were regranted to the current tenants with the crown replacing the earl of Ross as superior. On 8 February George Leslie, earl of Rothes had the annual rents of Kincardine and the lands in the thanage of Fettercairn within the sheriffdom of Kincardine confirmed.¹⁷⁵ Then on 4 August the king confirmed Walter Ogilvy's grant of Thaneston in the sheriffdom of Kincardine,¹⁷⁶ originally granted to Ogilvy by Earl John in 1443. Many of the regrants occurred in the sheriffdom of Nairn, which had looked to the earl of Ross as the jurisdictional power for generations. Hugh Rose, baron of Kilravock, was in Edinburgh and resigned and received his lands of the barony of Kilravock and the annexed lands of Easter Geddes on 11 March 1476.¹⁷⁷ Less than two weeks later Sir Alexander Dunbar of Westfield also resigned and was re-confirmed in his lands in the sheriffdom of Nairn as well as his lands in the barony of Kingedward.¹⁷⁸ In addition, Alexander Dunbar received the lands of Moyness which had been removed from the previous tenant, Thomas Cumming of Altyre, the tenant who held them when John MacDonald had been earl.¹⁷⁹ This was followed shortly thereafter by royal confirmation of William,thane of Cawdor and his wife, Mary, in their lands in the sheriffdoms of Nairn, Inverness, and Forres on 29 May the same year.¹⁸⁰ In Lochaber Duncan Mackintosh resigned his holdings and received a regrant on 4 July.¹⁸¹ Alexander Marshall, who had received his lands from Alexander MacDonald, earl of Ross, resigned his lands which were then given by the king to Andrew Munro, lord of Milntown.¹⁸²

Some regions, historically attached to Ross but which had been detached and made part of the lordship of the Isles by the MacDonalds, were confirmed as part of the Lordship. The Isle of Skye, which had been long associated with the earls of Ross, was clearly separated

¹⁷⁴ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1246; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A24.

¹⁷⁵ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1226; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A18.

¹⁷⁶ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1252; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A26.

¹⁷⁷ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1232; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A20.

¹⁷⁸ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1235; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A21.

¹⁷⁹ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1250; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A25.

¹⁸⁰ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1241; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A22.

¹⁸¹ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1243; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A23.

¹⁸² *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1694.

from Ross. The MacDonalds probably separated Skye from Ross at an earlier date, but the forfeiture of Ross confirmed that all island territories were a part of the lordship of the Isles,¹⁸³ and destroyed any vestige of Ross hegemony in the Hebrides. As for Trotternish, that bastion of Ross lordship in the Isles, it was to pass to John MacDonald's son, Angus Og, by 1485.¹⁸⁴ This was hardly a coincidence, as lordship over Trotternish was a role traditionally fulfilled by the earl of Ross. However, this echo of past links with Ross was to be severed with Angus's death, while control of Trotternish seems to have passed to the MacLeods of both Dunvegan and Lewis who laid claim to the land and office of bailie of Trotternish.¹⁸⁵

With the earldom of Ross forfeited, the financial administration of the earldom passed to the crown chamberlains appointed to Ross. John Munro, lord of Foulis, was first crown chamberlain after the forfeiture. In 1479 Munro recorded the rents of Ross which had been divided into five quarterlands: Delny, Balconie, Kinnairdie, Kinnellan, and *Fyrnnewar* with *Kessok*.¹⁸⁶ The place-names in these quarterlands were limited to lands almost exclusively to Easter Ross and the Beaully Firth regions. Even within this diminished administrative territory, local authority in Ross was not destined to remain in the hands of local lords. While the lord of Foulis was tasked with control of the earldom revenues, the power of Dingwall was given to an individual not associated with the traditional nobility of Ross; a significant amount of money was devoted to Alexander Fleming, the crown chamberlain of the baronies of Avoch and Redcastle – collectively known as *Ardmeanach*¹⁸⁷ – who was appointed as keeper of Dingwall castle and the Dingwall burgh lands.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, the administrative power given to the lord of Foulis was short-lived, as Munro authority was replaced by one James Dunbar of Cumnock who was chamberlain of Ross from 1480 to 1487.¹⁸⁹ Dunbar continued as chamberlain when Ross was elevated to the position of dukedom for the king's son, and it seems the finances of Ross remained in his hands from 1488 to 1490.¹⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the traditional role of local Ross kindreds in the Aird and the Black Isle declined rapidly. By 1476 Arthur Forbes was in charge of the

¹⁸³ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1246; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A24.

¹⁸⁴ *A.L.I.*, no. 119.

¹⁸⁵ *R.M.S.*, ii, nos. 2420, 2424 ; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A51-A52.

¹⁸⁶ *E.R.*, viii, 592-595.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 182, 373, 377.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 597-598.

¹⁸⁹ *E.R.*, ix, 58, 116, 402, 529.

¹⁹⁰ *E.R.*, x, 23, 93, 216.

financial administration of Ardmeanach, and from 1480-1481 he was titled as crown chamberlain of Ardmeanach.¹⁹¹ However, it was not Forbes who was the real authority; throughout this period the power of Huntly was extending from Inverness. The earl of Huntly had control of Redcastle in 1476,¹⁹² and from 1476 onwards to 1488-1492 the earl of Huntly was increasing his hold over Ardmeanach.¹⁹³

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the financial administration of Ross and Ardmeanach was becoming consolidated. From 1502 to 1505 David Learmonth, squire and friend to James Stewart, archbishop of St. Andrews, was the crown chamberlain of Ross, and in 1504 he was also functioning as chamberlain of Ardmeanach.¹⁹⁴ In addition, the archbishop granted to Learmonth the keepership of Dingwall and Redcastle in 1502.¹⁹⁵ The administrative merging of Ross with Ardmeanach points to the historic realities of the close nature of the regions' relationship; testament that Ross and the baronies of Redcastle and Avoch were inextricably tied through centuries of earls of Ross projecting their authority into the Black Isle and the Aird. This testament continued as Learmonth's successors retained authority over both; from 1505 to 1507 David Sinclair was the crown chamberlain for the earldom of Ross and Ardmeanach.¹⁹⁶ By August 1507 Andrew, bishop of Caithness, was the new chamberlain of Ross and Ardmeanach, positions he held through 1516.¹⁹⁷

It is possible that the lack of administrative trust placed in the local families of Ross indicates a propensity to support the MacDonalds of Lochalsh, and created difficulties for the royal chamberlains to wield power effectively. It is noticeable that after the forfeiture, with the exception of John Munro, all of the appointed crown chamberlains of Ross - James Dunbar, David Learmonth, David Sinclair and Andrew, bishop of Caithness - were given keepership of Dingwall castle.¹⁹⁸ The exclusion of John Munro from holding Dingwall castle may have been an indication that royal distrust of local lords was

¹⁹¹ *E.R.*, viii, 536; ix, 44, 123.

¹⁹² *E.R.*, viii, 375, 379.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 373-374; x, 26, 373.

¹⁹⁴ *E.R.*, xii, 151-153, 235-241, 242-246, 308. The archbishop of St. Andrews had a brief period of being the duke of Ross before beginning his clerical career, see below, 216-218.

¹⁹⁵ *E.R.*, xii, 235-236.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 303-308, 449-454, 513-516.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 546-557; xiv, 83-90, 140-149.

¹⁹⁸ *E.R.*, ix, 62, 118, 206, 404, 535; xii, 235-236, 238, 306, 551; xiii, 45, 144, 346, 451, 511. For the MacDonald of Lochalsh uprisings see below, 221-229.

undermining the position of established magnates. Perhaps the Dingwall kindred were the most disenfranchised under the new royal authorities. After all, during the years of MacDonald lordship in Ross, the office of chamberlain had traditionally been held by the Dingwalls and they had also held several other important duties in the MacDonald household whilst after the forfeiture the kindred were superseded by outsiders. The bishop of Caithness must have been embarrassed by the fact that Donald of Lochalsh's allies, led by the Dingwalls, had captured Dingwall castle in 1513. The castle had been in the keeping of the bishop, and the efforts to bolster royal defences seem to have been a priority of the bishop's, when in 1516 Dingwall and Redcastle were reinforced with armaments by the bishop of Caithness specifically to defend against the Islesmen.¹⁹⁹

Certainly the administrative skills of the bishop of Caithness were tested when Donald of Lochalsh led his campaigns to recover his family's inheritance; according to the exchequer accounts from 1515 to 1518, the heirs of Alexander of Lochalsh continued to claim and occupy the fishery of Oyckell from 1513 to 1518.²⁰⁰ These reports indicate that Donald of Lochalsh maintained his father's demand to be recognised in the north of Ross along the Oyckell River. The effects of Donald's activities in the 1510s were long-lasting; Janet, countess of Atholl, who acted as chamberlain of Ross in the place of her deceased husband in 1521, noted that from August 1518 to October 1521 the castles of Dingwall and Redcastle needed extra funds to be maintained because of the wars in those parts,²⁰¹ perhaps alluding to the activities Donald of Lochalsh and his allies.

Reluctant Administrators and Rebels

The king sought to establish his second son, James Stewart, a minor, as the new power in the north. James was made marquis of Ormond upon his baptism, possibly in 1476.²⁰² On 23 January 1481 James, marquis of Ormond, was granted the lands of the earldom of Ross and the castle of Dingwall.²⁰³ On 12 April, James was using the title earl of Ross, and had control of Avoch and Redcastle.²⁰⁴ It seems the king was serious about supporting his son's new titles. After a petition by James III, William Elphinstone, the archdeacon of Argyll

¹⁹⁹ *E.R.*, xiv, 140-141.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 85, 142, 303.

²⁰¹ *E.R.*, xiv, 384.

²⁰² Leslie Macfarlane, 'The Primacy of the Scottish Church, 1472-1521', *Innes Review*, 20 (1969), 111-129, 119.

²⁰³ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1457; *A.L.I.*, app. A, A34.

²⁰⁴ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1472.

and a capable lawyer in the service of the king, was given papal provision of the bishopric of Ross on 3 August 1481.²⁰⁵ Leslie Macfarlane, in his study of Elphinstone, suggests that this was a manoeuvre by James III to bolster his second son's new position in Ross with a dependable civil servant, and this has been repeated by Norman Macdougall in his work on James III. However, Elphinstone never actually held the diocese because he refused to pay the debts of the preceding bishop.²⁰⁶

As James III began to set up his second son, there was a further need to cultivate those who had previously been loyal to the MacDonalds in Ross, particularly those who had been elevated by the MacDonald earls to their current positions of power. In northeast Ross this was embodied by the MacCullochs, and in the heartland of the earldom of Ross it meant the Dingwalls. There is evidence that powerful royalist magnates, if not the king himself, took it upon themselves to offer direct patronage to these clans, thus attempting to bind the local lords of Ross more closely to royal will and to wean them away from their previous MacDonald sympathies. Magnus MacCulloch, kinsman of John MacCulloch of Tain, was a scribe and notary who found patronage with Bishop-elect Elphinstone. Norman Macdougall suggested that MacCulloch was recommended by Elphinstone to the service of Archbishop Scheves, under whose patronage MacCulloch copied two versions of Bower's *Scotichronicon*, as well as the work of Robert Bruce's physician, Maino de Maineri's *Regimen Sanitatis*, that had been commissioned for the king by John Ramsay, Lord Bothwell, in an effort to flatter James III.²⁰⁷

Despite setbacks, like Elphinstone's refusal to take up his place in Rosemarkie, the king continued to bolster the position of his second son in Ross. James Stewart was created duke of Ross and earl of Edirdale on 29 January 1488.²⁰⁸ The creation of a new dukedom indicated the king's determination to transform Ross into a permanent royal Stewart possession that could project Stewart supremacy into the rest of the north. However, the elevation of James Stewart was not well-received by James III's first son, the young Duke of Rothesay, who had not received the same amount of favour from their father and saw his younger brother as a threat. The favour received by the Duke of Ross at the expense of his elder brother was apparent when James III arranged the betrothal of Ross with

²⁰⁵ C.P.L., xiii, 105.

²⁰⁶ Leslie J. Macfarlane, *William Elphinstone and the Kingdom of Scotland, 1431-1514: The Struggle for Order* (Aberdeen, 1985), 79; Macdougall, *James III*, 272.

²⁰⁷ Macdougall, *James III*, 267.

²⁰⁸ R.P.S., 1488/1/6. Date accessed: 18 May 2015.

Katharine, daughter of the English king Edward IV, while Rothesay's own marital arrangements remained neglected.²⁰⁹

The fortunes of the duke of Ross were tied to his father's fate, a tenuous state considering James III's ability to provoke rebellion among his subjects and the animosity of his firstborn son. In July 1482 the king was imprisoned by his own subjects at Lauder while he was mustering his army to face the English Duke of Gloucester and a rebellious duke of Albany. This fractured the kingdom and saw power struggles between Albany and the king's half-uncles, the earls of Atholl and Buchan, and Andrew Stewart, bishop-elect of Moray.²¹⁰ From then on the power of the king was continuously challenged until July 1484 when the duke of Albany was defeated at the battle of Lochmaben.²¹¹

Royal largesse to the duke of Ross ended abruptly with the death of James III in 1488, killed while fleeing his defeat at the battle of Sauchieburn.²¹² Rothesay's envy and fear of Ross's relationship with their father contributed to this event, and, bereft of his father, the duke of Ross faced a hostile James IV who saw in his brother a potential challenge to his authority. On 17 October 1488, at his first parliament, James IV swiftly placed the duke of Ross in the keeping of Patrick Hepburn, lord Hailes and the master of the king's household, who held Edinburgh castle.²¹³ Because the duke was kept close to the king and unable to exercise authority of his own, others were able to take advantage. On 21 January 1489 the lords auditors ordered the earl of Crawford to stop occupying the lordships of Brechin and Navar, and to reimburse the duke for monetary damages.²¹⁴ On 15 February 1490 the duke of Ross was mentioned as being in the keeping of the king and again was victim of nobles withholding income from his lands.²¹⁵ James IV's long-term solution was to make his brother the new archbishop of St. Andrews in 1497.²¹⁶ It has been suggested that James IV's decision to appoint his brother to the archbishopric was a stroke of genius because it eliminated the duke of Ross as a secular power in the north, while the lands that

²⁰⁹ Macdougall, *James III*, 313-314; Macdougall, *James IV*, 12-13.

²¹⁰ Macdougall, *James III*, 171-202; Boardman, *Campbells*, 220-221.

²¹¹ For a study of events surrounding the battle of Lochmaben see; Macdougall, *James III*, 225-239.

²¹² R.P.S., 1488/10/27. Date accessed: 30 August 2015. For further analysis of the events surrounding James III's assassination see; Macdougall, *James III*, 319-351.

²¹³ R.P.S., 1488/10/53. Date accessed: 18 May 2015.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 1489/1/32. Date accessed: 18 May 2015.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 1490/2/13. Date accessed: 18 May 2015.

²¹⁶ Watt, *Fasti*, 384.

comprised the dukedom of Ross went to the crown; this also allowed the king to keep the archbishop's revenues for seven years until the young archbishop reached the canonical age of twenty-seven and assume his office.²¹⁷ Any further threat James Stewart could have posed to his elder brother was eliminated in 1504 when the youthful archbishop died prematurely.²¹⁸

The shifts in power within the Stewart royal family highlighted the fact that Stewart power in Ross was titular. From 1481-1497 the Duke of Ross exhibited no real presence in his dukedom, and William Elphinstone, the agent assigned by James III to act as an administrative bishop for the duke, had refused to involve himself in Ross affairs, preferring to become the bishop of Aberdeen instead.²¹⁹ The enterprise envisioned by James III to make Ross a bastion of royal Stewart power faded; the only result of his plan seems to have been an inability to define clear leadership to replace the MacDonald legacy in Ross.

This legacy allowed the MacDonalds to make a re-appearance in Ross in 1481 through Angus Og, John MacDonald's son, who challenged the leadership of his father most spectacularly at the battle of Bloody Bay, where Angus fought against his father's adherents: MacLean of Duart, the MacLeods of Harris and Lewis, and MacNeill of Barra.²²⁰ In Ross, Angus's challenge to both his father and James III appeared in the form of an invasion. The *Sleat History* records that Angus attacked Inverness and razed the castle. Then the earl of Atholl raised a force to repel Angus Og, composed of the Mackays, MacKenzies, Brodies, Frasers, and Rosses. The two armies met at Lagabraad in Ross where Angus Og was victor.²²¹ If the source is correct, the motive behind Clan Ross opposing Angus Og is difficult to determine. Although it is possible that the lord of Balnagown did not want a return to MacDonald lordship, it is more probable that his opposition to Angus was not necessarily anti-MacDonald in nature, but instead was a show of support for the forfeited John MacDonald; a similar stance was taken by the clans in the lordship of the Isles opposing Angus at the battle of Bloody Bay. The initial success of

²¹⁷ Macfarlane, 'The Primacy of the Scottish Church', 119-121; Macfarlane, *William Elphinstone and the Kingdom of Scotland*, 313-314; Macdougall, *James IV*, 151.

²¹⁸ Watt, *Fasti*, 384.

²¹⁹ Watt, *Fasti*, 4.

²²⁰ *H.P.*, i, 49-50. Norman Macdougall suggests the date of both the battles of Bloody Bay and Lagabraad were most likely in the year 1481 during the Anglo-Scottish war of 1480-1482; see Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 263.

²²¹ *H.P.*, i, 48-49.

Angus's attack on Ross depended on the weakness of James III.²²² It has been suggested that Angus Og's military actions in the 1480s were associated with more widespread opposition to James III, particularly after the earl of Argyll was removed from the king's court.²²³ But without gaining the loyalties of lords outside Clan Donald, particularly the lords of Ross, Angus's military successes could not sustain him, and he was murdered by his harper while at Inverness sometime in 1490.²²⁴

Angus Og's activities were not the only source of instability in Ross in the 1480s. The void in authority during the absentee tenure of the duke of Ross allowed the opportunity for an old feud to resurface. In 1487 the Mackays invaded northern Ross, with the assistance of the earl of Sutherland, and attacked the lord of Balnagown's lands of Strathcarron and Strathoykell, while the lord of Balnagown mustered his own forces in Eddertoun. The two armies met in a pass within Strathoykell called Allt a' Charais and the resulting battle was the biggest disaster in Ross history: it saw the deaths of Alexander Ross, son and heir of John Ross, lord of Balnagown, two William Rosses, John Marshal of Docharty, Angus MacCulloch of Terrell, and many others.²²⁵ The loss of the heir of Balnagown was complicated by the deaths of men who had been traditional allies for years. John Marshal of Docharty's death in particular marked an allegiance to the descendents of Hugh of Philorth that dated back to the 1350s.

The battle of Allt a' Charais in 1487 was an extension of the feud brought about by the violent burning of Angus Mackay in the church of Tarbat by the Ross kindred in 1438,²²⁶ but both these events were probably based on the earlier grant that gave Ferincoskry to the Mackays in 1415;²²⁷ Strathoykell, Strathcarron, and Eddertoun [Westray] were all northern territories of the lords of Balnagown, in close proximity to Ferincoskry, with Strathoykell being adjacent to Ferincoskry. The link to Ferincoskry was further hinted at by the inclusion of the MacCullochs in the lord of Balnagown's muster, a testimony to the bonds that had been built since 1450 when John Ross of Balnagown and Alexander MacCulloch

²²² Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 263.

²²³ Macdougall, *James III*, 331, 341; Macdougall, *James IV*, 36-37.

²²⁴ *H.P.*, i, 51-52; Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 264; Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 110-111, Appendix ii, 207.

²²⁵ *Calendar of Fearn*, no. 40; Gordon, *Sutherland*, 78; *Wardlaw*, 114-115.

²²⁶ *Wardlaw*, 103-104.

²²⁷ *A.L.I.*, no. 19.

of Plaids had challenged Earl John by placing before MacDonald's council John Ross's rights to Ferincoskry.

This slaughter was indicative of the lack of stability within Ross after the 1475 forfeiture; the violent conflicts which erupted throughout Ross during this period only underlined the more mundane events of division and opportunism unleashed by the removal of the MacDonalds. The Ross chronicle states that Thomas MacCulloch, abbot of Fearn, was wrongfully displaced by Andrew Stewart, bishop of Caithness, by the latter's sending of false information to the papal court. The result was that the bishop of Caithness also held the position of abbot of Fearn abbey, while Thomas MacCulloch lived in exile until his death in 1516.²²⁸ This episode demonstrates the repercussions to which clans that had supported the late MacDonald administration were subject; the MacCullochs were known adherents of both Earls Alexander and John, and were heavily involved in administrative duties for these earls. However, James III does seem to have realised that, despite royal suspicions regarding local loyalties, he needed to persuade the local magnates in Ross to support him. After John MacDonald had forfeited the earldom, John Munro continued to increase his administrative role in Ross and was the crown chamberlain of the earldom of Ross in 1479.²²⁹

James IV also realised the importance of local administrators. In autumn 1490, the same year as the murder of Angus Og, a significant change in leadership was taking place. John Ross, lord of Balnagown since 1440 and the duration of MacDonald lordship in Ross, resigned his lands in October in favour of his grandson, David Ross. On behalf of the young Duke of Ross, the king granted the Balnagown inheritance to David Ross.²³⁰ When compared with the lands granted to John Ross in 1440 by Earl Alexander, the royal grants of 1490 do not include Invercassly, Garty and 'Mulloch'.²³¹ Additionally, the king was not about to recognise Balnagown's claims to Ferincoskry and therefore it was no surprise that it did not feature in these new royal grants. The loss of certain lands was offset by the administrative trust the crown placed in the new lord of Balnagown. David Ross was made sheriff of Ross and on 12 November 1493 James IV ordered him to force the merchants of Tain, Sutherland and Caithness to take all of their marketable goods to Inverness.

²²⁸ *Chron. Ross*, 17-18.

²²⁹ *E.R.*, viii, 592-599.

²³⁰ *R.M.S.*, ii, nos. 1978, 1981-1982.

²³¹ *A.L.I.*, no. 31. The 'Mulcowy' in the 1490 charter could be the 'Multuy' [Moultavie] from the 1440 grant or perhaps the mysterious 1440 'Mulloch'. Either way, one of these granted in the 1440 charter was not a part of Balnagown lands granted to David Ross in 1490.

However, this decree was not executed by the lord of Balnagown until exactly six months later in the presence of Angus MacCulloch, lord of Plaids, Walter Ross, Donald Reed and Hugh 'Alexanderson', bailies of Tain.²³²

Alexander of Lochalsh

Scholarship argues that Alexander of Lochalsh, son of Gillespic, was considered the effective lord of the Isles after the death of Angus Og.²³³ It is probable that Alexander was also viewed as the heir to MacDonald lordship in Ross by those in the earldom who remained loyal to Earl John after the forfeiture. Gillespic had been one of the more influential men in Earl John's administration in Ross, and held sizable tracts of lands within the earldom. Alexander's position as nephew to the forfeited earl enhanced his claim, and the disfunctional dukedom of Ross offered an opportunity for the line of Lochalsh to reassert itself in Ross. As a result, Alexander of Lochalsh probably exercised significant influence with the local magnates.

Traditional histories agree that the earldom of Ross was controlled by Clan Donald after Angus Og was eliminated. The *Sleat History* claims that after the death of Angus Og in 1490, Alexander of Lochalsh was the acknowledged lord over those lands in Ross which he had inherited from his father, Gillespic.²³⁴ The *Book of ClanRanald* also records that Alexander of Lochalsh made the earldom of Ross his own.²³⁵ Although the MacKenzie sources are confused as to who led the MacDonalds during this period, both the earl of Cromartie and the *Applecross MS* agree that Easter Ross was the centre of the MacDonald lord's sphere of power. The earl of Cromartie spoke of how Alexander of Lochalsh held his winter court at Balconie which he had inherited from his father,²³⁶ and the *Applecross MS* agrees that the leader of the MacDonalds used Balconie as his chief residence.²³⁷ It is curious that Balconie was perceived as the central location of Alexander's activities during his time in Ross. Utilising Balconie, a traditional seat of the earls of Ross and also in close proximity to certain lands his father had held after the forfeiture of the Douglas earl of Ormond, bespeaks of a priority to secure the legacy of both his father and his uncle. There

²³² *Invernessiana*, 163-164.

²³³ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, Appendix ii, 207; Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 264.

²³⁴ *H.P.*, i, 54-55.

²³⁵ *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 165.

²³⁶ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 475-476.

²³⁷ *H.P.*, ii, 22.

was already an historical precedent for Earl John and his nephew to draw upon: the failed attempt by Earl William III to ensure his half-brother, Hugh of Philorth, would inherit the earldom in the 1370s. While the clan traditions are unreliable, contemporary evidence reveals that Alexander of Lochalsh at least had control over parts of northern Ross; he occupied the fishery of Oykeil in Ross for successive years, claiming it was his inheritance, a claim which continued to be recorded in the exchequer rolls long after Alexander's death.²³⁸ Not only had the northern lands of Ross along the Oykeil River been held by Alexander's father, but they had also constituted the lands held by Hugh of Philorth in 1333.

If the MacDonalds of Lochalsh were seen as the inheritors of the MacDonald claim to the earldom of Ross, it would seem that Alexander of Lochalsh's militant activities in the 1490s sought to establish the Lochalsh lineage as the premier power in the earldom. In 1491 Alexander of Lochalsh seems to have tried to establish himself as the dominate power in Ross, but was defeated by MacKenzie of Kintail in the famed 'Blàr na Pàirce'.²³⁹ In the immediate prelude to the battle, the *Sleat History* states that Alexander went to Ross with a group of retainers consisting of 'a small body of the Ross people' but also acknowledges that a significant number of those in Ross opposed Alexander and joined the MacKenzie chief.²⁴⁰ From the perception of the MacDonald historian, this was no foreign invasion of Ross, and ties in with the MacKenzie sources; it seems that Alexander had retainers from Ross and was presiding over lands in Ross. Alexander of Lochalsh's aggressive actions seem to derive from an internal struggle for dominance within the earldom.

Exactly who in the earldom supported Alexander of Lochalsh is something of a conundrum, as there is little contemporary evidence to link Alexander to specific nobles in Ross; the main source of information of allegiance in the earldom comes from the clan histories. The Earl of Cromartie's account states that those opposed to Alexander of Lochalsh featured men from Strathconan, Strathgarve, the braes of Ross, and the men of Contin, but Cromartie's only specific mention of a supporter of MacKenzie in Easter Ross was the intimidated bishop of Ross whom MacKenzie browbeat to step in line. However,

²³⁸ *E.R.*, ix, 58, 116, 403, 533; xiii, 44, 143, 345, 450, 510.

²³⁹ *H.P.*, i, 55; *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 165; Macdougall, 'Achilles Heel?', 264.

²⁴⁰ *H.P.*, i, 55.

Cromartie does state that Cromartie had the reluctant aid of the Frasers of Lovat and extols the virtues of the lord of Brodie.²⁴¹

The conjecture that many in Ross supported Alexander of Lochalsh might be corroborated by the peculiar absence of the Rosses and Munros from the list of Ross families who joined the MacKenzies recorded by the *Wardlaw MS*, which does list the Dingwalls, MacCullochs and Denoons as those in the earldom who mustered under MacKenzie's banner, to which was added a contingent sent by the Frasers of Lovat.²⁴² *Wardlaw's* inclusion of the Dingwalls of Kildun in the anti-MacDonald force headed by the MacKenzie chief is questionable. The Dingwalls owed their prestige and position to John MacDonald, the former earl of Ross, and certain members of the family had been particularly close to the old MacDonald leader. That the Dingwalls continued to adhere to their old loyalties well into the early 1500s was documented when they were key supporters of Donald of Lochalsh, the grandson of Gillespie.²⁴³

Donald Gregory was convinced that Munro of Foulis was a supporter of the lord of Lochalsh, citing the despoliation of Munro lands by the MacKenzies in the aftermath of Blàr na Pàirce.²⁴⁴ Alexander MacKenzie stressed that in fact the Munros were absent from the list of those who joined the MacKenzies since they were not mentioned by Sir Robert Gordon, but instead, this tradition was a later transmission by Donald Gregory.²⁴⁵ Indeed, there is evidence that the Munros of Foulis were actively working in the interests of the lord of Lochalsh in conjunction with those in the sheriffdom of Nairn who also maintained their allegiance to Clan Donald in 1492. On 26 October 1499 the king ordered Alexander Lord Gordon and other sheriffs to confiscate the possessions of Hugh and William Munro - the brothers of the late John Munro, lord of Foulis - amongst others, who had joined Hugh Rose, lord of Kilravock, in 1492 to raid Ardmeanach and Redcastle on the Black Isle. Similar letters previously sent to David Ross had not been enforced, causing the king to

²⁴¹ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 476-481. Supposedly the Braes of Ross had been in the possession of the MacKenzies of Kintail since January 1464 and were composed of land in Wester Ross, see *A.L.I.*, no. 81.

²⁴² *Wardlaw*, 111-112.

²⁴³ See below, 226-229.

²⁴⁴ Gregory, *History*, 57.

²⁴⁵ MacKenzie, *History of the Munros of Fowlis*, 27. As part of his rebuttal of the assumption of Munro involvement at Blàr na Pàirce, MacKenzie followed up by sounding a scathing rebuke of an unnamed contemporary historian whom MacKenzie accused of intentionally placing words in the mouth of Sir Robert Gordon to the affect of adding the Munros to this battle by replacing Gordon's account with that of Donald Gregory.

accuse David Ross of disobeying royal commands.²⁴⁶ Therefore it seems that the lord of Foulis was probably an active adherent of Alexander of Lochalsh, while David Ross, lord of Balnagown continued to be a lacklustre royal agent. Curiously, Clan Ross is not mentioned as being involved by any of the clan histories.

Aonghas MacCoinnich rejects the idea that Hugh Rose of Kilravock worked on behalf of Alexander of Lochalsh and cites Rose's service to the earl of Huntly.²⁴⁷ Yet, the activities of the Mackintoshes and Roses demonstrate they were a source of unrest and violence, and possibly attached to Alexander of Lochalsh. On 26 February 1497 Hugh Rose and his son John Rose, along with many other notables of Ross and the Aird, received remission for their crime of the murder of four men; Alexander and John Noble, William 'Gawane' and a chaplain surnamed Maurice. These men had been murdered in the graveyard of the cathedral church of Ross.²⁴⁸ In 1498 Hugh Rose had a disagreement with James Stewart, still titled duke of Ross, over the rents of Culmors.²⁴⁹

Other former MacDonald tenants in the sheriffdom of Nairn and the barony of the Aird may have supported Alexander of Lochalsh. On 10 November 1492 James IV gave remissions to William, thane of Cawdor, and several of the thane's kinsmen and followers for the murder of several men.²⁵⁰ The violent activities of the thane did not stop. On 26 April 1494 he and his son, John, were arraigned to be beheaded, but by 25 October the king granted pardons to them.²⁵¹ William of Cawdor's familial relationship with John MacDonald, former earl of Ross, and the timing indicate the offences of these men were linked to active participation in Alexander of Lochalsh's activities.

In 1492 Kenneth the younger, son of the Kenneth who won Blàr na Pàirce, was accused of fighting against the Chisholms of Strathglass and killing Harold Chisholm.²⁵² As discussed earlier, the Chisholms of Strathglass had probably allied themselves with the MacDonalds

²⁴⁶ *Family of Rose*, 168-170; *Invernessiana*, 173.

²⁴⁷ Aonghas MacCoinnich, 'Kingis rabellis' to 'Cuidich 'n Rìgh'? Clann Choinnich: the emergence of a kindred, c. 1475-c. 1514', in *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland, c. 1200-1500*, ed. Steve Boardman and Alasdair Ross (Dublin, 2003) 175-200, 195.

²⁴⁸ *Family of Rose*, 164; *Invernessiana*, 165.

²⁴⁹ *Family of Rose*, 167-168.

²⁵⁰ *Cawdor Bk.*, 80.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 81-82; *Invernessiana*, 164.

²⁵² *Family of Rose*, 170-171.

in the late fourteenth century,²⁵³ and the death of a leading member of the kindred at the hands of the chief of the MacKenzies could be interpreted as a Chisholm attachment to the cause of Alexander of Lochalsh. Alison Cathcart suggests that Farquhar Mackintosh was imprisoned by the king in 1495 because he had participated in Alexander of Lochalsh's rebellion.²⁵⁴ Finally, in his study of the MacKenzies, Aonghas MacCoinnich suggests that the MacKenzies themselves were in the midst of internal conflict during the 1490s with one faction, led by Kenneth Og and his uncle, favouring allegiance to Clan Donald; these men's attacks on Ardmeanach in 1492 represented support for the cause of Alexander of Lochalsh.²⁵⁵ In sum, there are many indicators that the traditional tenants of the earls of Ross were split in their loyalties; a civil war within the earldom was occurring between those who held that the MacDonalds were the rightful earls of Ross, and those who benefited from royal favour.

If Alexander of Lochalsh received assistance from Ross nobility, then the united front in the face of MacDonald aggression depicted by some sources, particularly the MacKenzie sources, rapidly disintegrates, and is replaced by a more complicated picture where loyalties to the MacDonalds were not set aside so easily. Whatever support the lord of Lochalsh received from Ross seems to have remained loyal despite setbacks. The *Book of Clanranald* states that in the aftermath of his military defeat, 'Alexander had no men left but such as he had of the men of Ross.' Thereafter he went west to seek the aid from John Cathanach, but was murdered by MacIain of Ardmurchan and John Cathanach's son, Alexander.²⁵⁶ If the source is accurate, Ross supporters stayed faithful to him even after all his other forces had been wiped out or deserted. This strength of loyalty in Ross might have encouraged the ambitions of Alexander's son, Donald of Lochalsh, to view Ross as his birthright.

Donald of Lochalsh

Even after the murder of Alexander of Lochalsh, a tradition in the *Sleat History* continued to associate the Lochalsh line with the earldom of Ross through the life of Donald of Lochalsh, the son of Alexander:

²⁵³ See above, 119.

²⁵⁴ Cathcart, *Kinship and Clientage*, 46.

²⁵⁵ MacCoinnich, "Kingis rabellis' to 'Cuidich 'n Rìgh'?", 191-199. This would conflict with the Mackenzie killing of Harald Chisholm.

²⁵⁶ *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 165.

Now Donald Gauld, Alexander MacGillespig's son, was in a very low condition; he had a dauvich of lands from his uncle Lovat. He gathered a great many necessities, such as seed, etc., among the best men in Ross, for his being a great man's son. There was a common fellow in his company, Paul, who gathered together his thigging in Ross. This man asked Donald Gauld what he meant to do with all the trash he was gathering? Donald Gauld answered, that mean and low as that was, he could do no better, and as it was God's will to reduce him to that low and despondent state, he ought to be content.²⁵⁷

This humble rendition of the beginnings of Donald of Lochalsh relates that the young man's survival rested on his reliance on noblemen in Ross and his supposed Fraser relatives in the Aird. Donald's nickname, 'Gallda', meaning 'stranger' or 'lowlander', indicates that the MacDonald historians did not perceive Donald as one of them; while related by blood to powerful Hebridean lords, Donald was identified as an outsider. Traditionally this has been thought to refer to Donald's time in Edinburgh.²⁵⁸ Donald did spend time at the royal Stewart court in 1508 and in 1513.²⁵⁹ He seems to have become a royal favourite and had been knighted by 10 December 1515.²⁶⁰ However, it is possible that 'Gallda' represented Donald's early ties in Ross: perhaps he had been fostered by a noble family of Ross. The nickname supports the *Sleat History* in seeing Donald primarily in a Ross context. Its account is supported somewhat by records. On 27 February 1499 Donald was confirmed in his father's estates which included Lochalsh, Lochbroom, Lochcarron, Kishorn and the much fought over Ferincoskry.²⁶¹ Donald's landed possessions tied him more to Ross than to the Isles.

The strength of these ties was made evident when Donald rebelled against royal authority in the 1510s, a situation intermittent until his death in 1519.²⁶² It seems likely Donald of Lochalsh rebelled in order to reclaim the legacy of his grandfather as the most important man in Ross, and conceivably to press a claim to become earl of Ross. Whatever the aim, he received aid from magnates in the earldom of Ross and the Aird. 'Weland' Chisholm of

²⁵⁷ *H.P.*, i, 56.

²⁵⁸ John L. Roberts, *Feuds, Forays and Rebellions: History of the Highland Clans 1475-1625* (Edinburgh, 1999), 32.

²⁵⁹ *T.A.*, iii, 415; iv, 101, 105, 137, 239, 350, 405, 418, 429, 432, 433, 443.

²⁶⁰ *R.M.S.*, iii, no. 54.

²⁶¹ Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 342-344.

²⁶² Gregory, *History*, 106, 113-126.

Comer assisted Donald in taking Urquhart Castle.²⁶³ The Dingwalls demonstrated a particular readiness to rebel against royal authority in support of the Lochalsh cause. On 1 December 1515 John MacKenzie of Kintail, William Dingwall of Kildun, William MacCulloch and one John Falconer were granted remissions by the king's privy council for their treasonous act of capturing and holding the royal castle of Dingwall.²⁶⁴ Donald Gregory assumed MacKenzie was in charge of this venture and only mentioned Chisholm's joining the venture, omitting the presence of Dingwall. Gregory's explanation assumed the attack was unattached to the concurrent Clan Donald rebellions.²⁶⁵ Since Gregory's assessment of the capture of the royal castle, scholarship has sought to reinterpret what happened. Jean and R.W. Munro cite Dingwall's involvement, and his prominence as the leader of the attacking force, suggesting he was in charge of the enterprise to capture the castle as part of Donald of Lochalsh's uprising.²⁶⁶ This seems more plausible than Gregory's idea of an isolated attack by MacKenzie; Donald of Lochalsh seems to have gained the cooperation of the MacKenzies.

Dingwall of Kildun joined Donald of Lochalsh's uprising and led the effort which captured Dingwall castle for reasons that seem rooted in his clan's loyalties to Clan Donald. This history of service to the MacDonald earls of Ross was complemented by the relationship the Dingwalls had with the Lochalsh branch of Clan Donald, through further service to Gillespie of Lochalsh during the mid-fifteenth century when he was granted authority of large portions of lands within the earldom of Ross. Kildun was listed by the *Sleat History* as being part of the lands in Ross which Gillespie MacDonald had been granted.²⁶⁷ However, unlike most of the other lands in Ross listed, there are no charters which can corroborate that Kildun was part of the Lochalsh possessions, nor did it appear as part of the inheritance of either Alexander or Donald of Lochalsh. Nevertheless, the MacDonalds of Lochalsh did seem to inherit the close links of patronage that the Dingwalls had with John MacDonald, earl of Ross. William Dingwall had strengthened his clan's ties and fortunes to the MacDonalds of Lochalsh through marriage, having married Donald of

²⁶³ Batten, *Charters of the Priory of Beaulieu*, 184.

²⁶⁴ *R.S.S.*, i, no. 2671. The editor of *R.S.S.* indexed this MacCulloch as one of the MacCullochs of Mertoun, see *ibid.*, 746, but this seems incorrect as a MacCulloch involved in the uprising in and around Dingwall would almost certainly have been a part of the MacCulloch clan whose base of power was in Ross centred in Plaids.

²⁶⁵ Gregory, *History*, 116-117.

²⁶⁶ *A.L.I.*, Appendix D, 306.

²⁶⁷ *H.P.*, i, 54.

Lochalsh's sister Janet.²⁶⁸ This marriage most likely reinforced William Dingwall's loyalty to the Lochalsh cause. Dingwall's willingness to provoke royal wrath may have also been a result of economic prejudice Ross suffered during the period. From 1499 to 1502 the king had been promoting the power of Inverness at the expense of the economic prosperity of the burghs of Tain and Dingwall.²⁶⁹

If William Dingwall was working on behalf of Donald of Lochalsh in 1515, then what was John MacKenzie doing aiding Dingwall take the castle? The MacKenzies of Kintail were known opponents of Donald's father Alexander of Lochalsh in the 1490s. Why did the MacKenzies alter their political stance towards the Lochalsh MacDonalds when Donald began his fight with royal authorities in the 1510s? It seems that Donald's rebellion(s) in the 1510s had the ability to draw upon a wide range of support which had the effect of splitting loyalties in the north. The Dingwall, MacKenzies, MacCullochs, and Chisholms all seem to have joined Donald.

Donald may have also received the support of the Frasers of Lovat. The *Sleat History* names his mother as the daughter of Hugh of Lovat, and states that Donald received land from his uncle, the next lord of Lovat.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, it relates that a man named Paul had helped Donald gather his 'thigging' in Ross.²⁷¹ Paul seems to have been an uncommon forename in Ross, and considering the Fraser connection to Donald, this could have been the Paul Fraser who is found in 1524 with William Dingwall of Kildun;²⁷² he was probably the same Paul Fraser who became dean of the diocese of Ross in 1520.²⁷³ A Fraser accord with Donald of Lochalsh was likely given this circumstantial evidence. If so, then a Fraser/Dingwall concord had been formed with the objective of supporting the claims of Donald of Lochalsh. Finally, Donald may have also been close to the Munros of Foulis. By the end of end of 1515 Donald of Lochalsh had made a brief peace with the king and on 3 November Hector Munro issued a charter to him. This act was witnessed by John Munro,

²⁶⁸ A.L.I., Appendix D, 306.

²⁶⁹ *Invernessiana*, 173-178.

²⁷⁰ *H.P.*, i, 54, 56, 64.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷² Fraser, *Cromartie*, ii, 342-344.

²⁷³ Watt, *Fasti*, 355-356.

vicar of Urquhart and one Alexander Munro, and the chief of the Camerons among others.²⁷⁴

Yet whatever support Donald of Lochalsh did receive was tempered by royal efforts to offer patronage to local magnates. In 1514 the royal government gave MacKenzie of Kintail and Munro of Foulis control of Wester Ross, while Ross of Balnagown was given authority of Easter Ross. Other important magnates with interests in Ross were also given positions. Fraser of Lovat was given authority over Strathglass and Chisholm was given the same in Urquhart and Glenmoriston, while both Grant and Huntly were given larger areas of control in Moray.²⁷⁵ Both the lords of Balnagown and Foulis - men who may have supported Donald's father in the 1490s - are notably absent from the list of those who supported Donald of Lochalsh. In conjunction with their royal appointments, this may imply that they were hesitant to join Donald of Lochalsh. Nevertheless, both the lords of Munro and Ross demonstrated only lukewarm support of the government measures to subdue Donald of Lochalsh.²⁷⁶ Acceptance of royal commission may have been dangerous in Ross. The lord of Balnagown's reluctant position as royal agent does not seem to have been popular; this was made clear when Walter, lord of Balnagown sought government aid after his kinsman Alexander Ross was killed in Sutherland on 18 May 1517.²⁷⁷

Donald of Lochalsh's ability to rally the Dingwalls but not the Munros or Rosses may indicate a difference in perceptions in Ross, which originated in the 1420s when Clan Donald first took control of Ross under Earl Alexander. Those who owed their rise to prominence to Clan Donald - like the Dingwalls - were probably more attached to Clan Donald's continuing presence in Ross, and more susceptible to joining military efforts to secure this. Nevertheless, the MacDonalds of Lochalsh were able to draw upon the support of nobles in the earldom of Ross and the Aird to a far greater extent than John MacDonald's heirs, Angus Og or Donald Dubh. As late as 1515, Donald of Lochalsh had the ability to cause great instability in the Scottish north, tapping into support in the Ross heartland and the Aird. Donald's capacity to invoke support in Ross was based on the legacy built by his grandfather, Gillespie, as one of the great landowners in the earldom and the right hand of Earl John.

²⁷⁴ *R.M.S.*, iii, no. 54.

²⁷⁵ *A.D.C.P.*, i, 8.

²⁷⁶ Gregory, *History*, 115-116.

²⁷⁷ *A.D.C.P.*, i, 142.

Conclusion

Norman Macdougall called the earldom of Ross the ‘Achilles heel’ of the MacDonald lordship because Earl John focused the bulk of his attention on this, the most vulnerable region of his hegemony, which allowed more militaristic men like his cousin, Donald Balloch, to bring down the wrath of the king upon the earl.²⁷⁸ However, such a label implies that the earldom somehow caused the destruction of this John MacDonald’s fortunes. Perhaps it would be helpful to separate John’s perceived weaknesses as lord of the Isles from his lordship in Ross.

The lordship of John MacDonald in Ross differed significantly from that of his father. John’s personal rule in the earldom was delegated to others in a similar fashion to the way Donald Balloch was allowed to exercise practical authority in the lordship of the Isles. Most prominent of these lieutenants was John’s half-brother, Gillespic, lord of Lochalsh. Gillespic effectively held all the border lands of Ross. In the north he held the vital region of Ferincoskry, playing a key role in enforcing the peace on this border. Though this control of Ferincoskry negated any residual claims that John Ross, lord of Balnagown, may have held over the land, it did facilitate relations between Gillespic and John Ross, since Gillespic could deter raids from aggressive neighbours, particularly the Mackays of Strathnaver. Ross of Balnagown may have viewed the presence of Gillespic in Ferincoskry as a welcome compromise, and it is conceivable that this arrangement fostered a perception that Gillespic was the guardian of the earldom’s interests. To the west, Gillespic held Lochalsh, Lochbroom, Lochcarron, and that region known in the fourteenth century as ‘North Argyll’, traditionally held by the earls of Ross. This provided insulation for the core territories of the earldom in Easter Ross from clans of the lordship of the Isles and from Clan MacKenzie in Kintail. In the east Gillespic was granted posts by the king previously associated with the lordship exercised by the deceased Douglas earl of Ormond in 1455, and with the barony and castle of Redcastle dominating the southern half of the Black Isle. Gillespic was arguably in a position to extend his authority throughout the rest of the Black Isle and south into the Aird. These large landed assets were enhanced by Gillespic’s status as the earl’s lieutenant and sheriff of Inverness. The lord of Lochalsh was therefore the great marcher lord of Ross, providing protection for both the earldom and its earl.

²⁷⁸ Macdougall, ‘Achilles Heel?’, 257.

This underlines Earl John's tendency to delegate authority, which could be interpreted as effective lordship. Through the utilisation of his kinsman, the earl had managed to benefit from the removal of Douglas power and improved relations with James II. However, it is precisely this delegation of authority which risked the earl being remembered as ineffectual. This pattern may very well have derived from John's youthful start at exercising lordship. He had inherited the lordship of the Isles and the earldom of Ross as a minor, and practical authority probably lay in the hands of Gillespie in Ross while the veteran Donald Balloch oversaw the Isles. This might have contributed to the perception that John was incapable of strong personal rule, requiring others from his family, or a select number of nobles from the lordship of the Isles, to secure and maintain his possessions in Ross for him.

Within the core Ross lands, Earl John demonstrated a similar approach in administration to that of Earl Alexander: a reliance on local men for administration and enforcement of his policies. In fact, John may have been more astute than his father at managing internal Ross affairs, since his promotion of the Dingwalls as the new administrative kindred did not seem to have created the tensions experienced by Earl Alexander when the MacCullochs were elevated in the north. The Munros of Foulis continued as strong administrative agents of the MacDonald earls despite the death of George Munro. John Ross of Balnagown was also active within the earldom, though perhaps not as prominently as the Munros and Dingwalls.

While historians might view John as a weak lord because of the friction found within the lordship of the Isles during his lifetime, the opposite seemed to have occurred in Ross. If the battles of Bealach nam Brog and Clach na h-Àirigh did occur in the 1450s, then there was a significant military following that the Earl could rely on, derived from the local nobility of Ross. Earl John may have been able to muster Ross military might for offensive purposes in coordination with Donald Balloch's activities. The major clans of Ross involved in these battles on behalf of the earl of Ross - the Rosses of Balnagown, the Munros of Foulis, and the Dingwalls - were all actively involved in the administration of the earldom, and were willing to fight for their MacDonald earls. This suggests Earl John was able to maintain the successful relationships in Ross forged by his father, and that the nobility of the earldom in the mid-fifteenth century should be viewed in general as content with its second MacDonald earl.

Within the earldom, divisions sparked by the battle for the diocese were on the mend. Bishop Tulloch was still finding himself at odds periodically with his colleagues in Ross and with the papacy, but compromise had lessened the tensions between Tulloch and those who desired that their own kinsmen control the diocese. However, these compromises were prone to be tested and upon the death of the bishop a renewed surge of anti-Tulloch sentiment began to reassert itself. However, any internal cohesion building within Ross during this period was offset by external pressures and wavering allegiances outside the earldom. Although the clans in Ross were finding their stride under MacDonald lordship, others who had adhered to the MacDonalds in the past were forced to consider switching sides. The events which led to the downfall of the Douglasses necessitated this fluctuation. This was seen in the wavering allegiances of the Mackintoshes, tenants of both Douglas and Gordon lords. Their confrontation with the Munros in 1454 may have derived from these tensions.

Still, the kindreds of the Aird on the whole seemed less than eager to switch their allegiance quickly. Thomas Fraser, lord of Lovat, who had expressed his loyalty to the earl of Ross through the legal mechanism of manrent in 1442, set a precedent of loyalty to the MacDonalds. With the death of Alexander MacDonald the Frasers might have taken the opportunity to pull away from their obligations rendered to the dead earl; however, the evidence from traditional histories would seem to suggest otherwise. The Frasers demonstrated continued loyalty to John MacDonald, through their involvement in the events associated with both battles of Bealach nam Brog and Clach na h-Àirigh. According to the Fraser chronicle, the lord of Lovat contributed manpower to help rescue the kidnapped person in the former, and gave succour to the wounded tutor of Foulis in the latter. The loyalty that Thomas Fraser had given the MacDonald earls of Ross was a fact consistently pushed into the background by later Frasers. The culmination of Fraser denial of their clan's loyalty to the MacDonald earls of Ross can be found in the Fraser chronicle itself, wherein the author completely omits the life of the Thomas Fraser who had given the bond of manrent to Earl Alexander MacDonald.²⁷⁹

At first glance, the traditional relationship between the earls of Ross and the thane of Cawdor seemed frail under Earl John. William, thane of Cawdor, was closely tied to the Stewart kings as chamberlain north of the Spey and instrumental in collecting the king's revenues. More worrying for the earl of Ross, the thane of Cawdor continued to

²⁷⁹ *Wardlaw.*

accumulate royal favour by acting as the king's military agent against the Douglasses. Even so, Earl John needed to retain the loyalty of this important vassal. Having an administrative agent of the king as a tenant offered the earl a line of communication with the royal government, while concurrently the thanage of Cawdor could act as a buffer from those whose ambitions threatened the integrity of Ross, particularly the earl of Huntly. With these thoughts in mind the earl sought to keep William of Cawdor close and in this he was successful. The marriage between William of Cawdor's son and Earl John's cousin, Mary of Sutherland, demonstrated this; it not only bound William of Cawdor's fortunes closer to Ross, but also drew the thane into the sphere of Ross/Sutherland politics, that could further deter William of Cawdor from breaking from his allegiance to his MacDonald lord. The success of Earl John's Cawdor policy is found in the behaviour of Cawdor in the years of John MacDonald's forfeitures; there is no evidence that Cawdor acted against the earl of Ross, or against the Lochalsh MacDonalds.

John MacDonald's tenure as earl of Ross, therefore, should not necessarily be seen as weak. If perhaps not as centralised as his father, Earl John demonstrated that in some matters he did not stray far from how his own father had conducted affairs and could retain in some measure the loyalties of his vassals and allies. As Alexander Grant notes, both Alexander and John exercised powers associated with regality prior to 1464 by supplanting the king's role in granting inheritance in Ross.²⁸⁰

John MacDonald's forfeiture of the earldom in 1475 ushered in a period that had similarities with the MacTaggart downfall in 1372; the earldom's leadership was removed and replaced by royal favourites incapable of cultivating sustainable lordship. The resulting uncertainties made many in Ross turn to alternative sources of power. Gillespie of Lochalsh functioned in a similar capacity as Hugh of Philorth had a century earlier; both were half-brothers and chief lieutenants to their respective earls, and both were the largest landowners in the earldom. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many in the earldom were willing to view Gillespie's son and grandson as heirs to the earldom.

When Earl John forfeited the earldom, his progeny lost all claim to Ross. This was not the case for the Lochalsh MacDonalds; because of Earl John's extensive patronage to Gillespie, both Alexander and Donald of Lochalsh had landed possessions unaffected by the forfeiture that made them premier lords in the earldom, while also having the lineage of

²⁸⁰ Grant, 'Celtic Fringe', 130-131.

being nephews to the forfeited earl. Gillespie's jurisdictional sway and ability to extend his own considerable patronage seems to have cultivated loyalties that were transmitted to Alexander and Donald. In retrospect, the 'rebellions' of Alexander and Donald seem to have been efforts to capitalise on Gillespie's legacy, and re-establish MacDonald control in the earldom. Again, this had similarities with the events leading to Harlaw in 1411; Alexander and Donald of Lochalsh counted on local resentment towards royal government decisions, and supportive nobles linked to the MacDonalds to sustain their efforts.

Thesis Conclusion

The medieval history of northern Scotland was dominated to a large extent by the earldom of Ross. Early on this earldom was wedged between the power of the Norse and that of the Scots. Because of this, the earldom developed a semi-autonomous identity similar to that attributed to the better known marcher lords along Scotland's southern borders. This phenomenon continued in the following centuries with Norse power replaced by the power of the lordship of the Isles. Even when the MacDonalds claimed the earldom, the prominence of Gillespie, lord of Lochalsh, on the border lands of the earldom underlined the fact that the earls of Ross were effectively marcher lords.

Heiresses, Comital Title, and Regional Ambitions

The political patterns of lordship exhibited in the earldom of Ross were not unique, but rather highlight similar events in the rest of late medieval Scotland. Indeed, the history of the earldom of Ross often demonstrates some of the themes that were prevalent during the period. One mechanism that was particularly noteworthy for its ability to facilitate change and cause disruption was the failure of comital male lineages and the political usage of heiresses to assert regional dominance. When David II oversaw the marriage of Euphemia Ross to Walter Leslie in 1368, and Robert II confirmed his son Alexander Stewart's marriage to the same lady in 1382, and when Alexander MacDonald became earl of Ross through his Leslie mother, the use of heiresses to control the political development of Ross was clearly seen. In this, Ross was not unique. The fourteenth century witnessed the destruction of many of the old comital families and the reduction of the power of earldoms, as heiresses were married off to royal favourites in efforts to strengthen royal governments. Alexander Grant notes several patterns that weakened the status of earldoms: the rapid dynastic comital turnover due to the failure to produce male heirs, forfeitures to the crown, the merging of multiple earldoms under the control of single individuals, and the trend by kings like David II and James I to refuse granting the title of 'earl', preferring to make the husbands of heiresses 'lords' of earldoms instead in order to retain crown control of the futures of the earldoms.¹

¹ A.H. Grant, 'Earls and Earldoms in Late Medieval Scotland (c. 1310-1460)' in *Essays presented to Michael Roberts: Sometime Professor of Modern History in The Queen's University of Belfast*, ed. John Bossy and Peter Jupp (Belfast, 1976), 24-40, 25-30.

Perhaps Boardman's narrative of the fate of the earldom of Fife best illustrates all of these points. The death of Duncan, earl of Fife, in 1353 initiated a battle between Robert Stewart, the Steward, and royal favourites of David II to obtain control of Fife. This battle was to last until 1372. Central to the quarrel was the fate of Isabella, daughter of Earl Duncan. In 1358 David II had granted Fife to a local Fife lord, William Ramsay, a grant that was contested by the Steward who had orchestrated the marriage of his second son, Walter Stewart, to Isabella. In 1362 Walter Stewart died and David II immediately arranged for Isabella to marry another royal favourite, Thomas Bisset, who was then made lord of Fife, with the entail that when Bisset died the earldom would revert to the crown.² Then in July 1370 papal dispensation was granted for the Steward's daughter, Marjory, to marry John Dunbar, the brother of the king's mistress, a marriage that did not have the permission of the Steward but which had been compelled by David II.³ This was followed by David II forcing Isabella, countess of Fife, to resign her earldom, whereupon the king made John Dunbar the lord of Fife. When the Steward became Robert II in 1371, the fight to control Fife entered its final stage with Isabella recognising Robert II's son, Robert, earl of Menteith, as her heir in 1371. Finally, in 1372 John Dunbar agreed to relinquish his claim to Fife in exchange for the earldom of Moray.⁴ The fate of Fife has similarities with what was experienced in Ross. In particular, the success of John Dunbar in Fife at the expense of the Steward in 1370 bears a remarkable resemblance to Walter Leslie's ascension to the detriment of the earl of Ross in 1366. In both cases David II had compelled the daughters of his established magnates to marry royal favourites in order to remove earldoms from the hands of the king's political enemies.

The royal enmity that David II held for many of his earls, and his willingness to manipulate a female claim to gain an earldom for his favourites was further witnessed in the forfeiture of Malise, eighth earl of Strathearn, foreshadowing the later fates of Malise's brothers-in-law, William, earl of Ross, and Hugh of Philorth. Malise was put on trial twice for treason in 1339 and 1344, and although he was judged innocent, he was still declared forfeit so that David II was able to grant Strathearn to his adherent Maurice Murray through a marriage to the widow of Malise, seventh earl of Strathearn.⁵

² Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 13-15.

³ *C.P.L.*, iv, 85; Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 24.

⁴ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 25, 50-52.

⁵ For a contextual narrative of the demise of Earl Malise see Penman, *David II*, 105-109.

One significant value attached to heiresses was that their existence could be used to circumvent male entails. This thesis has already remarked on how David II used the marriage of Walter Leslie and Euphemia Ross to discard the male entail that would have made Hugh of Philorth heir to the earldom of Ross. Boardman notes that, despite the fact that the earldom of Moray had a male entail that upon failure of the male line reverted to the crown, the legitimacy of John Dunbar's acquisition of the earldom of Moray derived from his mother being the sister of John Randolph, earl of Moray, who had been killed in 1346.⁶ In turn, the Dunbar comital line in Moray was left to two heiresses by 1430 and Michael Brown suggests that it was by 1442 that the eldest, Janet, married James Crichton, the chancellor's son, while Elizabeth married Archibald Douglas, second son of the seventh earl of Douglas.⁷ This resulted in an intensification of the larger struggle for power between the Douglasses and Crichtons which resulted in an initial Douglas victory with Archibald becoming earl of Moray in 1445, but with the downfall of the Douglasses a decade later Crichton was granted the earldom.⁸

A marriage to an heiress that was to have great import for Ross in the early fifteenth century was in 1404 when Alexander Stewart, son of the earl of Buchan became earl of Mar through marrying the widowed Isabella, countess of Mar, who resigned her earldom into Alexander's hands.⁹ The circumstances of this event resembled his father's marriage to Countess Euphemia of Ross. Boardman notes that when Isabella's husband, Malcolm Drummond died, the duke of Albany initially surrounded the countess with his own men, with plans made that Albany's man, Thomas Erskine, was to be made earl through his marriage to the great granddaughter of Donald, earl of Mar who was dead by 1297. However, Albany's scheme was outmanoeuvred when Alexander Stewart proposed marriage to Isabella at Kildrummy castle with the aid of local support.¹⁰ This was remarkably similar to how, upon Walter Leslie's death, Euphemia was initially surrounded by enemies of the lord of Badenoch headed by David, earl of Strathearn. Apparently, the new earl of Mar had learned from his father the value of outmanoeuvring their Stewart kin by swift actions directed towards heiresses.

⁶ Boardman, *Early Stewart King*, 51-52.

⁷ Brown, *Black Douglasses*, 269.

⁸ For narrative and analysis of Douglas/Crichton struggles see Brown, *Black Douglasses*, 272-296.

⁹ *R.M.S.*, ii, no. 1239.

¹⁰ Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 20-22.

The earls of Ross were themselves expert practitioners in the art of material gain through the manipulation of heiresses. Through marriage the earls of Ross had claimed one half of the earldom of Buchan, and the irony cannot be lost that while in 1371 William III bemoaned the fact that his daughter's marriage had been used against him, he himself had taken full advantage of the inheritance of the daughters of his brother-in-law, Malise, to control Caithness. Furthermore, Earl William's own complicity in the death of the last MacRuairidh lord in 1346 allowed the MacDonalds to envelop MacRuairidh territory through the heiress, Amy MacRuairidh. Therefore, the political trend of gaining title and wielding regional power through the various heiresses of great families seems to have been a primary method for the establishment and exercise of lordship in late medieval Scotland. This mechanism created great disturbances throughout Scotland, and could be pointed to as indicative of the disruptions in regional lordship throughout the country during this period.

Grant notes that James I was even harsher than David II towards the comital class, and through forfeitures, executions, captivity, or other deaths the earldoms of Buchan, Fife, Mar, March, Menteith, Moray, Strathearn, Sutherland, and Ross lacked active earls; under James I, only two men received title of earl, the king's son, David, and the short one-year tenure of Alan Stewart in Caithness.¹¹ Nevertheless, the integrity of the earldom of Ross's lands seems to have weathered the worst calamities produced by male progeny failure and royal intervention compared to other earldoms. The Ross possessions in the earldom of Buchan were severely curtailed once the MacTaggart dynasty was removed from comital title. Yet, other threats did not materialise; if Euphemia Ross had produced a son with Alexander Stewart, then the earldom of Ross would have been divided between that son and Alexander Leslie. However, since that marriage ended without offspring, it seems the earldom of Ross itself was not noticeably affected by the trend of comital land detachment, despite having two successive lords of Ross rather than earls. Indeed, when Alexander MacDonald was made earl of Ross, there is no evidence that he had inherited a diminished earldom aside from the Buchan lands which had been picked apart by Walter Leslie and Alexander Stewart in the late fourteenth century.

Although the earldom was spared the detachment of its lands, the MacTaggart dynasty was not; the 1366 marriage of Euphemia and Walter Leslie foreshadowed the removal of the traditional lineage from the comital title. Yet through Hugh of Philorth and his descendents, the lineage survived as the lords of Balnagown and Clan Ross. Building

¹¹ Grant, 'Earls and Earldoms', 33-35.

relationships with this and other local kindreds were essential for those who had ambitions to rule Ross; both Walter Leslie and Alexander Stewart tried to engage with local Ross powers, and the MacDonalds were able to secure the earldom of Ross through the relationships they built with the Rosses, Dingwalls, Munros, and MacCullochs.

The tactic of newcomers securing earldoms through the establishment of alliances with local kindreds, sometimes related to extinct comital dynasties, was a strategy commonly used throughout late medieval Scotland. Boardman notes that the descendents of the old earls of Atholl, known as the *Clann Donnchaidh* [Robertsons], likely played an important part in the Steward's ascent to the lordship of Atholl in 1342, and cites a Clanranald tradition that recounted goodwill between this clan and the Steward.¹² This clan would later play a role in the feuds between the earl of Fife and the earl of Buchan to control Atholl and Perthshire in 1389, with the Robertsons joining Alexander Stewart's sons, James and Duncan, against the interests of Fife.¹³

The importance that the earls of Ross placed on their kin Hugh of Philorth and Gillespie of Lochalsh by granting them the borderlands of Ross in order to better protect the integrity of the earldom, and their roles in providing dynastic security, has parallels with what occurred in the Lennox. Michael Brown has shown that in the early thirteenth century Maldouen, earl of Lennox, placed his nine brothers along western Lennox in order to secure the border with Argyll. The protection offered by the cadet branches of Lennox culminated in the 1340s when Donald, earl of Lennox orchestrated the marriage of his daughter and heiress, Margaret to Walter of Faslane, a descendent of one of Maldouen's brothers, in order to maintain the integrity of the earldom and continuity of the dynasty while much of Scotland around Lennox was being swallowed up by Stewart ambitions.¹⁴ Brown further demonstrates that reliance on junior family branches and local support in Lennox continued into the fifteenth century through the son of Walter and Margaret, Duncan, earl of Lennox, whose daughter, Isabella, married Murdoc, son of the duke of Albany. Cadet family proved vital yet again to the survival of the dynasty when Duncan was executed as part of the downfall of the Albany Stewarts in 1425 and the earldom was taken by the crown. Yet, Duncan's widowed daughter managed to resuscitate her dynasty's

¹² Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 7, 28 endnote 31; *H.P.*, i, 18-20.

¹³ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 169, 188 endnote 46; Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 18-19.

¹⁴ Michael Brown, 'Earldom and kindred: the Lennox and its earls, 1200-1458', in *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland, c. 1200-1500*, ed. Steve Boardman and Alasdair Ross (Dublin, 2003), 201-224, 207-214.

claim to the earldom largely through the local support of her illegitimate grandsons and half-brothers.¹⁵

As noted earlier, when Alexander Stewart became earl of Mar in 1404 the support of the free tenants of Mar was used to provide legitimacy to his claim.¹⁶ Boardman highlights the emphasis on Alexander receiving the local support of families like Forbes, Irvine, Leslie, and Chalmers, and suggests that local rather than national desires motivated this support.¹⁷ This is supported by Brown, who notes that after Harlaw the patronage Mar extended to not only the Aberdeenshire lords that had enabled his takeover of Mar, but also of kindreds throughout Scotland north of the Mounth, particularly in Angus and Banffshire.¹⁸

The stability of the earl of Mar's patronage seemed to rest on the cadet branches of his own family, and the alliances with Atholl kindreds like the Robertsons which had been maintained since the Steward had cultivated them in the 1340s. Brown suggests that a significant portion of the political and military successes of the earl of Mar may be attributed to his brothers, nephews, and other extended family that had risen under their patriarch, the Wolf of Badenoch, and who had inherited the military capabilities of Badenoch and Atholl through the loyalties of kindreds like the Robertsons.¹⁹ Three decades later this reliance on local support continued; Brown notes that in the fractious battle to control the earldom of Mar after the death of Alexander in 1435, the competing Robert Erskine and the lords of Gordon relied upon the local support they found in the families of Forbes and Ogilvie respectively.²⁰

The voracious appetite to gain control of heiresses and cultivating local kindreds underlines another tendency: the expansion of a dynasty's regional power through comital title. This was exemplified by the earls of Ross as their focus remained on regions outside their earldom. For both the MacTaggart and MacDonald dynasties, the earldom of Ross was key to exercising lordship into Caithness and Sutherland to the north, Skye and northern Argyll to the west, and the Aird, Black Isle and Buchan to the east. Control of an

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 216-223.

¹⁶ See above, 87.

¹⁷ Boardman, 'Lordship in the North-East', 21-22.

¹⁸ Brown, 'Regional Lordship in North-East Scotland', 34-37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-44.

²⁰ Brown, 'The Great Rupture', 5-6, 10-11.

earldom represented the opportunity to have a stable base of operations from which to extend.

The process of accumulating influence in areas around an earldom was not peculiar to Ross. Similar tendencies were exhibited by other successful comital dynasties. The actions of the eighth earl of Douglas in installing his sons as earls of Moray and Ormond indicate the desire to use comital titles to secure a northern Douglas legacy. The fact that 'Ormond' was a new earldom, created out of the remnants of Murray lands indicates the importance placed on comital title. Obtaining Murray lands was not enough to ensure dynastic longevity in the region, comital title alone seems to have been the mechanism through which the Douglasses could achieve this. Certainly the evidence points to local comital title being the only concrete way in which the Douglasses could effectively begin to challenge the traditional Ross pre-eminence on the Black Isle and along the Beaully Firth. Indeed, it is questionable whether the earldom of Ormond could have been truly effective in representing an alternative power to Ross if the Douglasses could not transform that power into regional extensions of patronage.

The first Stewart king, Robert II, was the master at providing his sons comital titles in order to give legitimacy to the expansions in Stewart influence. The earldoms of Carrick, Fife, Menteith, Strathearn, Caithness, and Buchan were all granted to his sons. In most cases, these earldoms were already dominated by Stewart power prior to the official recognition provided by the grants. Perhaps the most pertinent example of the desire for comital title to provide security to regional power already established was the Badenoch Stewarts. Boardman suggests that one of the reasons Alexander Stewart, lord of Badenoch, was so often belligerent to the rest of his family prior to the 1380s was the fact that, despite his regional pre-eminence, he was not given comital rank, while his younger half-brothers were.²¹ This hunger was also reflected in the Badenoch Stewart takeover of the earldom of Mar. The acquisition of this earldom precipitated the resurgence of Badenoch Stewart power that reached as far as Inverness.

The desire to have comital title may have been even more acutely felt by baronial families seeking to establish legacies in lands in which they had entrenched themselves. The success of the Douglasses, Lindsays, and Setons in carving regional lordships without comital title did not negate the aspiration to attain comital standing. Indeed, it was their

²¹ Boardman, *Early Stewart Kings*, 52, 75-76.

regional power which allowed them to acquire newly created earldoms based on their scattering of various estates. Baronial families that did not secure regional superiority prior to their attempts of attaining comital title, such as the Crichtons and Erskines, found that reliance on the regional influence of their allies or royal favour was no substitution for established regional power.

The desire to obtain comital title may seem a logical extension of a magnate's ambitions. However, as seen with the earls of Ross and their counterparts across Scotland, obtaining an earldom was not the endgame, but rather a means to further greater regional ambitions. Indeed, the physical coherence and value of many earldoms in late medieval Scotland was rather questionable. Grant notes that from the mid-fourteenth century through the fifteenth century earldoms were becoming honorific rather than territorial as new earldoms were not associated with lands pertaining to a coherent province within the kingdom; sometimes even the name of the new earldoms did not correspond with any of the lands associated with the title, and the lands of the old earldoms were being picked apart leaving them devoid of their traditional provincial lands.²² The tendency towards disassociation of comital title with territorial coherence meant that an alternative value must have been placed on gaining title to earldoms. Increasingly comital title meant little without the ability to capitalise on that title in a wider sense; an earldom granted a way to dominate neighbouring provinces in the pursuit of regional hegemony, or legitimise a pre-existing regional supremacy.

The Value of the Earldom

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, a definition of what constituted the earldom of Ross is a conundrum if considered solely on the basis of static physical boundaries, because the lands owned or influenced by the earls of Ross maintained a fluidity complemented by a lack of evidence regarding the western extremities of the earldom's lands. Indeed, it is impossible to define the earldom's physical boundaries in isolation from the larger hegemony. Particularly in Wester Ross, there is no existing evidence of where the earldom ended, while the extent of the actual influence of the earls is known to have extended to Skye and Eilean Donan. Moreover, the particulars of how the earls actually exercised power in these extremities are vague as well. On Skye, the peninsula of Trotternish was clearly considered a separate lordship, one that the earls of Ross

²² Grant, 'Earls and Earldoms', 35-40.

sometimes held. But the rest of the island does not come under any specific lordship in existing records. With regards to the lordship of the earls of Ross in what was known as ‘North Argyll’ there are few references either, though the MacKenzie and MacDonald traditions certainly support the notion that the earls of Ross were the superiors over much of Northern Argyll.

It is possible that a definition of the earldom could be construed from the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century exchequer roll accounts regarding the five quarterlands of Ross, and the subsequent list of place-names catalogued within. The post-forfeiture crown chamberlains almost certainly oversaw an administrative structure which had already existed. From the earldom’s caput at Dingwall castle, which was in the keeping of the crown chamberlains, these men oversaw the administration of the earldom’s quarterlands. Delny and Balconie, both places that had featured in past earls’ charters, were listed as centres of two of the five quarterlands of Ross. Delny seems to have consisted of lands from the parishes of Kilmuir East and Logie Easter and ran along the Cromarty Firth from Tarbat Ness to edges of Alness parish. Balconie continues along the Cromarty Firth from where the quarterland of Delny ended and consists primarily of lands in the parish of Alness, extending southwest towards Dingwall. Watson notes that the quarterland of Balconie was co-extensive with the Munro-dominated territory known as Ferindonald.²³ The quarterland of Kinnairdie flows out from Dingwall and into the parishes of Contin and Fodderty, which then connects with the quarterland of Kinnellan which place-names are also primarily concentrated in Contin and Fodderty parishes. Finally, the place-names in *Fernewar* concentrate in the parish of Urray and along the Beauly Firth. Together these five quarterlands formed the administrative units through which the crown accrued earldom revenues and constitute a representation of the earldom’s worth.²⁴

But again, this is superficial and misleading as far as deriving a definition of the earldom is concerned. The lands that comprised these quarterlands were very much exclusive to Easter Ross extending from Delny to the Beauly Firth in a somewhat narrow pattern hugging the eastern shores of the Cromarty and Beauly Firths. Perhaps the most obvious omission in this administrative structure was the great northern stretches of lands along the Oyckell River, which had been held by Hugh of Philorth, and later by Gillespie MacDonald.

²³ Watson, *Place-names of Ross and Cromarty*, xxv.

²⁴ For a detailed list of the place-names associated with the quarterlands of Ross see *E.R.*, viii, 592-596. Note that the place-name ‘Balnagown’ listed under the *Fernewar* quarterland is a place-name in Urray parish, not the residence of the Ross lords of Balnagown, which was located just east of the quarterland of Delny.

The thanage of Cawdor and other outlying lands, many of which were associated with Nairn, were also attached to Ross in the exchequer accounts but not as part of the quarterland system, and by the beginning of the sixteenth century Ross was being administratively linked to Ardmeanach, a region historically associated with the Ross hegemony. Indeed, the royal decisions that dictated the makeup of the dukedom of Ross and the later choice to combine Ross with Ardmeanach are better understood through this historical attachment. In some ways these royal constructs represented more accurately the disposition of the previous earldom, because it included lands on the Black Isle and in the Aird; these lands had been in the purview of the earldom for centuries.

Therefore, when contemplating the value of the comital title of Ross and the definition of the earldom of Ross, the projection of the earls' regional power and influence through the comital title of their earldom seems to have been the primary value the earldom held. Indeed, the surviving records of the earls themselves testify to the significance they placed on affairs outwith the earldom. Ross then was the nucleus of a much larger area of lordship. Lordship over this hegemony of Ross seems to have been the real focus of successive earls, and perhaps this emphasis by the earls themselves contributed to the distortion and vagueness of the earldom's physical boundaries. The importance of the earldom of Ross was that it symbolised the legitimacy of controlling Scotland north of the Forth. The earldom of Ross is a primary example of how the comital unit of lordship did not function in isolation; power was drawn through dominating neighbouring regions, while the comital title gave that power legitimacy. This was the essence of the earldom.

Influence and Power

One thing that becomes clear in studying the earldom of Ross is that the political narrative of the earldom was not shaped by its borders. The power of the earldom was enhanced by the ability of the earls to establish themselves in adjacent regions for extended periods of time, thereby creating an extensive system of patronage. This was accomplished through a combination of military/political muscle and patrimony supplemented by jurisdictional titles. Both Farquhar and William I had extended the reach of the earldom to the west coast and Skye; this was made official when William II was created sheriff of Skye. While serving Edward I, William II managed to extend the power of Ross into Caithness and Sutherland, to the extent of commanding its military strength. Perhaps the apex of MacTaggart power was in the hands of William III, who held the position of justiciar north of the Forth; this office augmented the accumulated territories over which the power of the

earl held sway: Ross, Caithness, Sutherland, a portion of Buchan, the barony of the Aird, and the lordship of Skye. The earl of Ross represented far more than an earldom. The MacDonald earls, by virtue of their status as lords of the Isles, repeated this trend, perhaps even surpassing their MacTaggart predecessors in accumulated power and the ability to project that power. Therefore, it is difficult to separate the earldom from the wider hegemony over which the earls presided. Because of this, it is probably more helpful to think of the earldom in terms of projected power rather than the limited scope of physical boundaries.

Administration and Patronage

An intricate part of the earldom's evolution was the important local magnates, the clans they headed and their relationship with the earls. Thirteenth-century Ross saw the rise of the MacTaggart dynasty which, presumably, saw an equivalent increase in the fortunes of Farquhar's kindred. By the fourteenth century the clans which would be the predominant local forces for centuries begin to be seen in contemporary record, although later clan genealogists sought to place their presence in Ross far earlier; the Munros and the Rosses were the most prominent of the Easter Ross clans. The latter, descending from Hugh of Philorth, likely increased its retainer base dramatically as diehard supporters of Earl William III found themselves sidelined by the king's belligerent policies towards the old ruling family.

The advent of the MacDonald earls marked a significant increase in evidence regarding local administration due to the better preservation of charters. Through these documents the importance of local administrative agents to the earls is clear; both Alexander and John MacDonald relied heavily on local nobility. In particular the Munros seem to have played considerable roles as bailies and agents. Members of Clan Ross also played significant roles in administration, although the difficulties that sprang from ownership of Ferincoskry highlight the nuanced complexity that existed between earls and the important landowners in the earldom. Perhaps the most striking examples of this reliance are seen in the activities of members of the MacCullochs and Dingwalls, kindreds that prior to the MacDonald years were relatively unseen in contemporary records. The Dingwalls in particular often supplied individuals that became familiars of the earls.

From surviving records Easter Ross was set apart as the core of the earldom from an administrative perspective. Surviving records of the MacTaggart period deal almost

exclusively with affairs in Easter Ross or lands on the northern reaches bordering Sutherland. Records regarding lands further inland and to the west do not survive, but it is conceivable that these regions were treated in a different manner by the earls. It is telling that the MacDonald earls elected to rely on local administrators in Easter Ross while in the west and north the MacDonalds of Lochalsh became the leading landowners.

One region that was vital for the MacTaggart and MacDonald earls was the old Bisset barony of the Aird. Strong alliances with the local authorities in this barony were significant for securing the earldom from those who sought to weaken the earls of Ross. Despite the fractured nature of the Aird lordship after the Bisset forfeiture, it is clear there was continuity in the patronage that successive earls of Ross provided in the Aird. This can best be seen in the case of the family known as ‘of the Aird’. John of the Aird and, more prominently, Christian of the Aird seem to have played vital roles as administrative agents for Earl William II, so much so that it seems Christian enjoyed the benefits of Ross control of half of Buchan. Patronage to the Aird does not cease with the end of the MacTaggart line. It is clear that Margaret of the Aird and her Chisholm son-in-law became highly involved with Godfrey and Angus of the Isles, forming a relationship that echoed the earlier MacTaggart ties to the Aird.

Also important to earls from Earl Hugh onwards were their roles in the sheriffdoms of Cromarty and Nairn. This necessitated good relationships with established lords like the thanes of Cawdor and later the Roses of Kilravock. Finally, the inheritance of a portion of Buchan influenced successive earls. The keen interest in this asset influenced the policy of the MacTaggarts, the Lesliees, and Walter Stewart, and may have been an objective for the MacDonalds at Harlaw. Indeed, it could be argued that many of the actions of David II and the later Stewart monarchs regarding Ross centred around control over Buchan.

Relationship with Kings and Lords of the Isles

The earldom of Ross and its earls had varied, and sometimes tenuous, relationships with the Scottish kings. Early earls of the MacTaggart dynasty seemed to have been on cordial enough terms with their sovereigns, frequently acting as royal agents in ‘subduing’ the north and west, often for their own benefit. Both Farquhar and William I used royal politics to make themselves prime movers in the machinations of the kingdom of Man; William II had even more success with both John Balliol and Edward I at making himself the premier magnate in the north, and Earl Hugh was able to gain prominence on the Black

Isle and Nairn through his friendship with Robert Bruce. These earls were able to cultivate reputations as friends to successive Scottish monarchs which proved lucrative at advancing the fortunes of the earldom.

A fundamental shift in the earldom's relationship with the Scottish kings began in the second half of the reign of David II. From that point it would be characterised by antagonism, suspicion, and a desire by successive governments to bring the earldom under the control of royal authority. The death of William III ushered in a period of uncertainty. The frequent changes in leadership and a lack of successive royal patronage prevented the earldom from remaining the dominant power in the north. Unlike earlier MacTaggart earls, the Leslies and Alexander Stewart did not have the long-term support of successive monarchs willing to offer patronage. The Stewart kings perceived the Leslie/Lindsay affinity as a potential threat, and although Alexander Leslie and Alexander Stewart played a part in Stewart administration of the kingdom, there was a distinct uneasiness between these men and their Stewart relatives which made it difficult for the Stewarts to integrate Ross further into their patronage. This failure was made apparent when the earldom passed to the MacDonalds.

The earldom of Ross, its earls, its noble magnates, and its people were inextricably joined to the Hebrides and the lordship of the Isles. What seems to have been a critical factor in the Ross/Isles relationship was the concurrent relationship that the earldom had with the royal governments. During periods when the earls of Ross enjoyed good relations with a stable royal government was when the MacTaggart earls were most belligerent towards the Isles. Interaction in the 1300s seems to have based on aggressive military exploits encouraged by Scottish monarchs to take advantage of a weakened kingdom of Man. Good relations with Balliol power allowed Earl William II to assert jurisdictional power over Skye, Lewis and Wester Ross. After a brief alliance with Edward I, William II and his son Hugh were able to assert themselves in the west and maintain themselves in Skye while cultivating good will with Robert I. Even William III, last of the MacTaggart earls, while on good terms with David II prior to 1346 proved hostile towards Hebridean power which culminated in the murder of the MacRuari chief.

When the ties to the royal government turned sour after 1346 the earls began to look towards the Hebrides for alternative allies. The disenfranchised Hugh of Philorth and his progeny seem to have been drawn into the orbit of the MacDonalds. The advent of a Stewart royal dynasty only perpetuated this negative state of affairs as Stewart ambition

and a penchant for infighting served to destabilise the earldom. In contrast to the Stewarts, the lords of the Isles seemed to offer stability and continuity of a dynastic lineage. Even the Leslie, the first to displace the MacTaggarts, sought closer ties with the MacDonalds despite their connection to the Duke of Albany. Indeed, it could be suggested that the reason the MacDonalds were able to successfully gain the earldom was the inability of the Stewarts to provide security.

Continuity

Perhaps the most intriguing element in the development of the earldom was its strategic and political continuity. The MacDonald forfeiture of 1475 was not only a statement of royal antagonism towards the lords of the Isles, nor simply a Stewart attempt at consolidating power in the north. Royal efforts to limit the power of the earls of Ross had begun far earlier, with Earl John's submission being the final act. The MacTaggart earls had themselves consistently been viewed as obstacles to royal authority; the ability of the earls to act semi-autonomously and accumulate a large hegemony was a threat recognised by successive royal governments. Because of this the activities of the earls, regardless of which dynasty they belonged to, bear remarkable resemblances: a need to develop close ties to the nobles in the barony of the Aird and sheriffdom of Nairn served as a buffer against antagonistic governments; a desire to accumulate influence and power over Sutherland and Caithness; the reliance on a larger hegemony to insulate and strengthen the earldom; and a desire to preserve the semi-autonomy of the earldom from royal influence. The earldom of Ross granted to Farquhar MacTaggart was supposed to act as the royal bulwark of the north, but instead became a symbol of royal inability to secure royal authority in northern Scotland, a state of affairs that endured for three centuries.

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