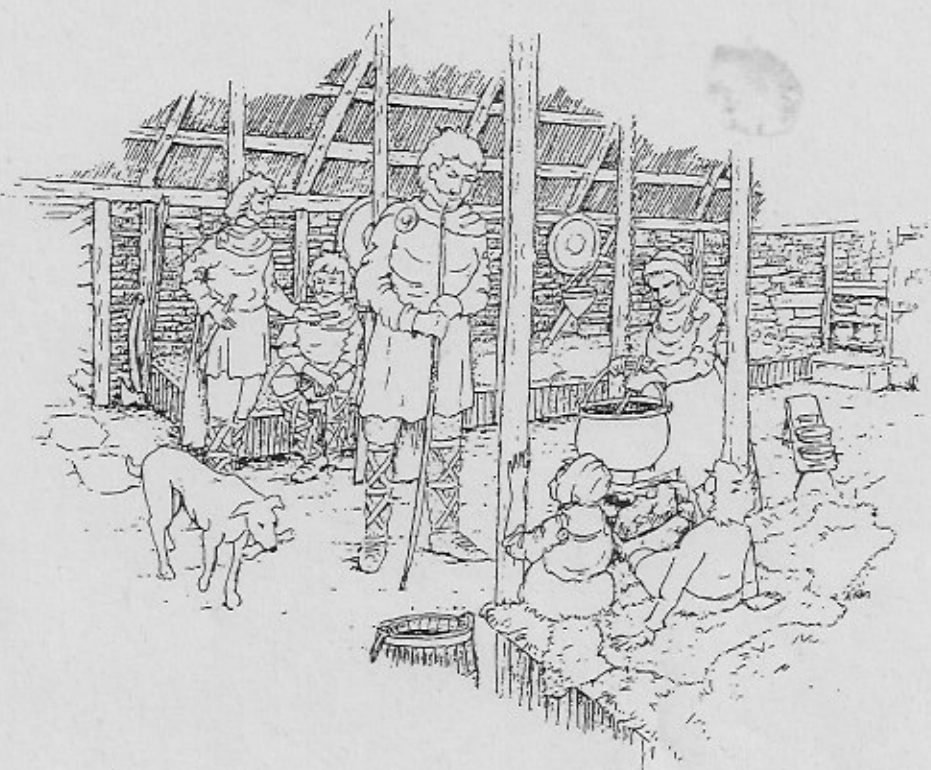


MACASKILL OF RUDH AN DUNAIN

Part I. Lieutenants of the Coast



MacAskills at home in about 1200AD - an author's fantasy

Introduction

In a study of family history, undertaken for my children, I turned to the family of my Mother's Grandmother, Jemima MacAskill, herself the Grand Daughter of Kenneth MacAskill, one of the last tacksmen of Rudh an Dunain in the Island of Skye. I became fascinated with MacAskill history and this is the result of some of my researches.

In 1864 Hugh MacAskill of Rudh an Dunain died without issue, the last of his family to inhabit and farm the peninsula that had been their home since the 12th century. This is the story of that family, how it came to Skye, the prominent part it played for 700 years in the life of the Island and how, in the 18th century, it came to leave. Along the way I hope to include some interesting aspects of clan history and custom. The tale will be in two parts - the first from the 12th century to the end of the 16th century, a period when the family were much concerned with military matters. I apologise, therefore, to those of you with an aversion to such a subject. In early days it was the tales of blood and

'derring-do' that survived. The old stories that are quoted here give a flavour of the ethos of the day though their accuracy is questionable, especially in regard to historical figures.

A Norseman called Askell.

There are several theories as to how the MacAskills came to Skye, but the story generally accepted involves one - Askell, who: "according to tradition came from Ireland. It would appear that he was involved in a feud about the succession to a kingship, and was forced to leave his native country about 1170. He came as a fugitive to Skye, where he was received in a friendly manner."

"the MacAskills were of Norse stock and their name is derived from Askell, or Asketil, the 'kettle' or 'sacrificial vessel of the gods'. Probably the name of the vessel was transferred to the person offering the sacrifice."

The Norse had come to the west of Scotland at the end of the eighth century, first as raiders then as settlers. By the

twelfth century they were well established, with the Hebrides incorporated into a kingdom ruled by the King of Man. Dublin was another Norse Kingdom and Orkney an Earldom, and both Man and Orkney owed allegiance to the King of Norway. Godred the Black held Man from 1154 to 1187 and during his reign his half celtic bother-in-law, Somerled, wrestled the Southern Hebrides from his grasp. Godred had conquered Dublin, and it is possible that the eruptions from this had led to the exile of Askell.

It is unlikely that he would have arrived in Skye entirely destitute, and the probability is that he came with his own people to a place where he was known. It has been speculated that he had visited Skye previously on a recruiting drive for men to serve his master in Ireland. Perhaps he and his people were welcomed by the governor of the island as a useful addition to the defence of the Northern Hebrides, constantly under threat from pirate bands and raiders.

This threat came partly from forces gathered in the shelter of the islands - Eigg, Rum and Canna, divided from Skye by an eleven mile sound. Jutting out in the centre

of this is the peninsula of Rudh an Dunain. From here the whole of the Sound of Canna is visible and there is even a small harbour, the only shelter on this south-western coast with immediate access to the sea in the face of the prevailing westerlies. From here instant warning could be flashed to the rest of the island and forces moved to meet a danger. Thus it was that MacAskill of Rudh an Dunain became the Lieutenant of the Coast and Warden of South Skye, a hereditary post confirmed by the MacLeod Chiefs when they became overall rulers of the island in the early thirteenth century.

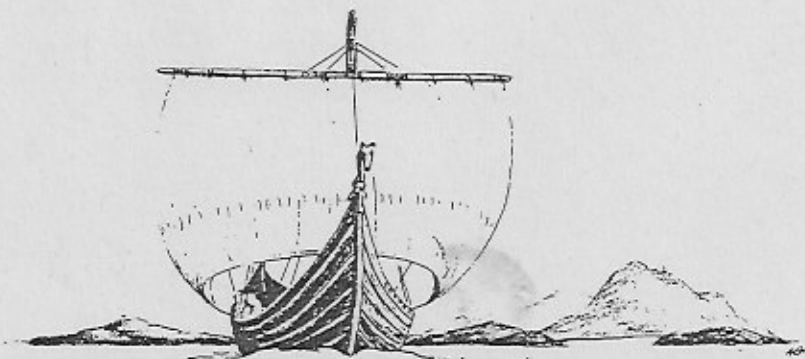
Lieutenants of the Coast

At this time MacAskills held not only Rudh and Talisker but they were also hereditary Constables of the castle of Dunscaith in Sleat, the legendary home of the amazon, Queen Scathaich. They thus had a grip on the whole of the sound. Alanus MacKaskyll, a scribe in a monastery at Perth in the 16th century describes them:-

"The MacAskills were the lieutenants of the MacLeods, both by sea and by land, from whom they held large territorial possessions in reward for their services as commanders of their galleys or birlinns; and one of them, clad in full armour, always accompanies the chief as his henchman."

Two early, somewhat allegorical stories, about the MacAskills are amusing:-

"Night and day in olden times, MacLeod of MacLeod maintained a Lieutenant of the Coast as a means of protecting his territory against the punitive



A birlinn under sail, like a small Norse longship but with a rudder instead of steering oar

and predatory raids of the Norsemen, and of the MacDonalds of Clan Ranald, who came sailing out of the shelter of the Small Isles, which they used as a convenient jumping-off place for their attacks on the south-western parts of MacLeod's Country.

The office of Lieutenant of the Coast at Rudh an Dunain was a hereditary one, bestowed on a family named MacAskill; and among the more dauntless of these lieutenants was Donald Dubh MacAskill. There was none in all the isles more adept with the bow and arrow than Donald Dubh.

One day he noticed a barge of the Clan Ranald in the sound of Canna. As the barge approached Rudh an Dunain, Donald Dubh recognised it to be intent on plunder, and manned by twelve stalwart MacDonalds. He quietly retired to the dun to collect an ample quiver, and then concealed himself behind a rock, from which he fired twelve arrows that killed the twelve rowers."

The second tale concerns another Lieutenant of the Coast who was possibly the son of the above "known throughout Skye as MacDhomhnuill Dubh - Son of Black Donald":-

"In pursuance of his duties, this lieutenant apprehended a man who formerly had been convicted of cattle-lifting, fire raising, and even murder. The Son of Black Donald did not detain him long in captivity, but tried him on the spot. He decided to execute him; but before doing so, he brought the prisoner to his own house, and supplied him extravagantly with bread and cheese and whisky, that he might thereby be the more able to endure his last moments on earth.

Thereafter the Son of Black Donald marched his captive up a steep brae above the sea at Rudh an Dunain, and beheaded him with his own sword. And the head rolled down the slope, crying out as it rolled: 'Faire, Faire, Mic Dhomhnuill Dubh!

Beware Beware, O Son of Black Donald!"

Rudh an Dunain

Rudh an Dunain is a world of its own, a sea girt triangle shut off from the rest of Skye by the bulk of the Cuillin which rise across its base leaving only a small way in, between the mountains and Loch Brittle.

The peninsula is three miles by three of undulating moor, rocky outcrop and low hills, uninteresting except for its apex which packs 6,000 years of history into under a square mile. Here there is a chambered cairn of the neolithic people, a cave used by stone age flint knappers and iron age smiths, old hut circles and the dun that gives the point its name. Dividing the apex into two is a small loch connected to a sheltered inlet by a man-made canal to form an inner and outer harbour. At the head of a shallow glen running up from the loch is the old township, about 20 ruined cottages and the only easily distinguishable building - the remains of a large farmhouse, one end gabled with chimney and the other rounded like a blackhouse. Scattered about, and only easily picked out from an aerial photograph, are vestiges of cultivation, rows of lazy beds.

The inlet is minute and not well sheltered; not a place where one would leave a boat riding at anchor for long; but then it was used for the Hebridean birlinn, accustomed to being pulled up on rocky beaches. Under the dun are two slips for this purpose and the canal, carefully lined with stone, is of the correct width to allow passage by a birlinn into the calmer waters of the loch though only at high water. Thus the MacAskills could maintain two ships ready for sea on the slips and others under repair, building, or in reserve in the loch.

The birlinn was an adaptation of the Norse galley of such a successful design that it was still in use in 1745. With only about 16 oars instead of the longship's 32, or more, it was nearly half the latter's length; but the advance was a rudder instead of a steering oar and it was thus more manoeuvrable. It has been calculated that ten households would be needed to man one birlinn and thus the people of Rudh could have crewed two. This would have



Donald Dubh MacAskill, from the gallery of the author's imagination



Creggan nan Fitheach - illustration by James Murray

been sufficient to police the sound and deter small raiding parties. Larger bodies would have to be met on land by the whole clan, warned by signal from the high point at Rudh, the Carn Mor. Should the clan go raiding, then reserve boats could be hauled out of the loch to be crewed by folk from the neighbouring townships at Brittle, Eynort and Talisker.

Rudh an Dunain is a natural defensive position. No one could slip past and attack unnoticed. Apart from the inlet, guarded by the dun, there is only one small very rocky and exposed beach where a boat could land and the approach to the township is guarded by a deep gully, the Slochd Dubh. Here then was the ideal base for a force tasked to protect the south-western approaches to MacLeod country.

An example of possible tactics used is the battle of Sligachan in the early 15th century. Warning of an invasion would have been flashed by beacon, and the Fiery Cross sent round. The clan would have gathered and the invading force met and defeated. Meanwhile MacAskill with his few ships had fallen on the enemy rear:-

"MacDonald, Lord of the Isles, laid claim to part of MacLeod's lands in Skye but their claim William MacLeod, 5th chief, by no means acknowledged, so MacDonald invaded his territory. The MacDonalds were commanded by Alistair Caroch (brother of the Lord of the Isles) who was slain in this conflict by Tormod Coal MacLeod. Very few of the MacDonalds escaped, as their galleys were taken in Loch Eynort by MacAskill's who put every soul on board to death, and carried their heads to Dunvegan. These were numbered and delivered to the Chief's warder."

(Note: William's legal right to his lands in Skye were, in fact, open to question.)

The Clan in Battle.

Severed heads seem to have a fascination for the sennachie. One features in a tale of a battle about 1490 when another invading force of MacDonalds, commanded this time by Donald Gruamach, were engaged near Creggan nan Fitheach (the Rock of the Ravens) by the MacLeods under Alistair Crottach. The battle was not going well for the defendants when:-

"By order of Alastair Crottach's mother, who was present, the fairy flag was displayed. The combat was renewed with redoubtable fury and immense losses on both sides. A party of MacDonalds, headed by Allan of Moidart, penetrated the MacLeod line, and cut off the chief, and the select band who guarded the fairy flag, from the rest of the clan. At this moment Murdo MacAskill cut down Donald Gruamach and, raising his head on a spear, ordered the MacLeod pipes to play the MacDonald lament. The MacDonalds were seized with panic and gave way on all sides. Allan of Moidart did all he could to rally them, but in vain."

The ravens according to the sennachie had a fine feast. However, there was no happy ending for the MacAskills.

"Allan of Moidart engaged in single combat with MacAskill and his three brothers successively, and killed them all, and then, with the remnant of his followers, made good his retreat." (Note: all the characters in this story existed but their part in the battle is dubious. Donald Gruamach was alive many years later and Allan of Moidart was a very old man).

There was a set order of battle for a clan at war. At the head was the Chief. Should he be a minor then the most experienced lieutenant would be selected as Captain. Around the Chief were his

staff - piper, standard bearer and gillies to carry his sword and armour and lead his horse. He also had his luchd-taighe or bodyguard, a highly trained band of young men who lived with the Chief and always accompanied him both in war and peace. Each chieftain, the head of a cadet branch or prominent family, commanded a company of kinsmen and tenants. The whole formed a regiment numbering from 250 for a small clan to a thousand for a large one. The MacLeods of Harris fielded between 700 and 1000.

The more important people, the daoine-uasail, or gentlemen as they were later called, formed the front rank. They were well armed with sword, bow and armour and most of their days were spent training with their weapons and keeping fit and agile. The rear ranks were filled with the dao, the lesser folk, who were equipped with home manufactured spears (perhaps adapted scythes), or if they possessed them locharber axes, a combined axe and spear with a hook for dragging down cavalry. The dao are said to have worn linen shirts daubed with pitch for protection.

The swords carried were vast and needed two hands to wield. One viewed at Talisker had a 37 inch blade, 2 inches wide, with a 14 inch hilt. James Logan, in MacLan's 'Costumes of the Clans' mentions one in the possession of James Stewart of Arvoirlich at five foot eight inches in length. These were probably swung like an axe or thrust like a spear. The bow was drawn, unusually, to the chest. Armour was mail reaching to the calves and worn over a saffron coloured tunic. A conical helmet protected the head and displayed the clan distinguishing emblems.

In battle the clan were first harangued by their bard, or sennachie, who worked them into a fever-pitch with tales of past heroism. They then threw off any surplus clothing, plaids or jackets and marched forward in line at a fast pace until they were in range of the enemy. Here they halted and fired a volley of arrows and, throwing down their bows, charged. If this didn't carry all before them a general melee ensued. These remained the Highlanders' tactics right up until Culloden. The musket superseded the bow but the Highlander was slow to change over. The musket was heavier, less accurate, had a shorter range and was expensive to throw away.

Set piece battles were not frequent but raiding between clans and cattle rustling were common. This was accepted and carried no stigma providing a way for youth to prove their manhood, and redress for the aggrieved. Another tale tells of a raid foiled by an early MacAskill:-

"The first (MacAskill) to come to prominence was William, who was 'seneschal' of Dunvegan. He lived during the chieftainship of Malcom 3rd Chief, whose foster brother he was, and had six brothers younger than himself". (The Chief had carried off the wife of Fraser of Glenelg and the Clan Fraser raided Skye in retaliation, defeating a hastily gathered force of MacLeods at Drynoch. They then proceeded to ravage the southern parts of the Island. Malcolm was at the time on a visit to Harris). So "William MacAskill collected together a select body of men, amongst them his six younger brothers, and resolved to recover the spoil of the MacLeods from the Frasers, or perish in the attempt. They took up their position in a wood above Broadford, on the direct road through which the Frasers had to pass. The Frasers, completely off their guard, were suddenly attacked, and their leader slain. This threw them into inexorable confusion, the greater part of them were slain, and the whole booty recovered by MacAskill."

The best known raid, or series of raids led, in about 1600, to the last set piece battle on Skye. Donald Gorm, chief of the MacDonalds had contracted a trial marriage, or handfast, with a sister of Rory Mor, chief of the MacLeods. This poor lass had lost one eye and Donald was loth to legalise the union and he sent the girl back

in a manner that could only be inferred as a deliberate attempt at offence. He had her mounted on a one-eyed horse, led by a one-eyed boy and followed by a one-eyed dog. Offence was taken. Raid and counter-raid followed until finally both clans faced each other across the bowl of the Corrie na Creiche, over a cache of stolen cattle. A battle ensued, with great loss to the MacLeods many of them being either killed, wounded or taken prisoner. This action influenced James VI to impose the Statutes of Icolmceill (Iona), the second of the three watersheds in the history of the Isles.

Largs to Icolmceill

The first watershed had been the Battle of Larg, which marked the birth of the clan system. Icolmceill marked the zenith of that system and Culloden the death. After Largs the Clan MacLeod, though feuding with them at times, fought generally alongside the Clan MacDonald under their leadership as Lords of the Isles. On the abolition of that title at the end of the 15th century the two clans were perpetually at each other's throats. At Icolmceill the chiefs were forced to accept great limitations on their power. The size of their bodyguard was restricted. They were only allowed to maintain one birlinn and they were directed to obtain rent for clan lands previously

allotted to chieftains in return for service. Thus the latter became tacksmen and economic considerations slowly came to play a dominant part in clan relations. One other condition imposed at Icolmceill was to aggravate the situation. Chiefs, and all gentlemen owning over 40 head of cattle became obliged to educate their children in the south. Many were influenced by the more opulent southern ways of life imposing further financial strain on clan resources, and some became almost absentee landlords weakening the ties that bound a clan together. From hereon, though they continued at Rudh an Dunain for a further 250 years and played a prominent part in the affairs of Skye, the MacAskills ceased to function as an important military arm of the MacLeod chiefs.

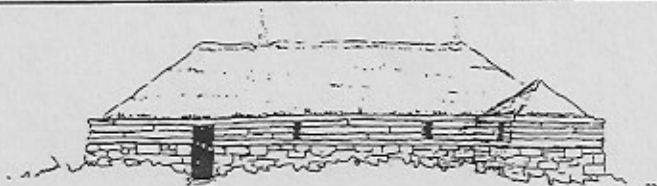
Such was the service given to the MacLeods by the MacAskills that one of the MacLeod chiefs decreed that every MacAskill gravestone should have carved upon it a warrior in full armour and the clan emblems.

Alisdair Murray - author and illustrator

Part II - 'MacAskill of Rudh an Dunain, Tacksman', will be printed in issue 13, winter '98

Three interpretations of Rudh an Dunain House and as it is to-day

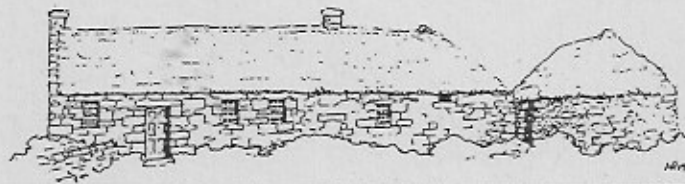
1. As it might have appeared in the 12th - 13th centuries with Viking influences



2. The medieval house, round ended possibly the same site using much the same stone foundations.



3. As altered in the 16th - 17th centuries, one end being rebuilt to incorporate a gable and chimney, with a fireplace on the ground floor and another in the loft which also had a small adjoining window.



4. The sad remains with evidence of the fireplaces and windows, slots for half truck rafters, one rounded end and a heavy stone dividing wall where a second chimney is drawn in illustration 3.

