

A History of Rannoch

By A.D. Cunningham

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Before William Wallace's remains had been taken down from the gibbet at Perth, Rannoch was sheltering another hero. It was in June 1306 that Robert Bruce took refuge here. He had not long had himself crowned king at Scone when he was overwhelmed by the English at Methuen (*near Perth*). He had few supporters with him which was not surprising. For as Earl of Carrick he had been a respected noble but he had changed sides more than once and he had just stabbed to death his likely ally, Red Comyn, the powerful Lord of Badenoch. So here he was, hated by the English and half of Scotland as well, with very few friends. But in Rannoch he had a friend.

By far the most powerful man here was Donnachaidh [*pronounced Connaha*] Reamhar, second son of Angus Mor, Lord of the Isles (*some would claim his descent from the Celtic earls of Atholl*). He had inherited from his father a portion of the lands at the east end of Loch Rannoch, and further extensive lands in the rest of Rannoch from his two marriages. History or legend gives him heroic qualitative as befits the man who was the first chief of Clam Donnachaidh and the progenitor of the famous Robertson Clan. For instance, he was called *Gaisgeach Mor Fea Chorrie* which means the great hero of Fea Corrie. This Corrie was used as a rallying point for his troops before battle. It was to be on active service on at least three occasions in support of Bruce and was used in after years by the Robertson clan as their meeting place after the fiery cross had gone around.

Donnachaidh took the side of Bruce, and the two of them became fast friends. They were the same age, with the same war-like instincts and both were tall, hardy men. When Bruce cast off his panoply of armour and joined Donnachaidh the two of them took to the ways of the half-naked mountaineers, making long journeys on foot, scrambling over rugged ground and enduring cold and hunger. Whether this is fact or fiction does not matter; they were both vigorous and tough men and both were to prove it; Bruce was a hunted man suffering extremes of hunger and exhaustion and as a warrior proving his skill and bravery; and Donnachaidh showing enterprise and endurance in battle and loyalty to Bruce.

Although local history does not record Bruce as taking part in the local battles, the Rannoch men built a home in Crossmount Wood for him and his wife. *Seomar an righ* (*King's Hall*) as it was called was built in a gully opposite the '*Queen's Pool*' in the Tummel. The latter takes its name from having been used as a ferry by the Queen of Robert the Bruce. Also, a circular fortification was put up hereby for their safety.

The first occasion on which Donnachaidh's men were gathered at Fea Corrie was when they were called to take action against approaching forces from the South. The MacDougalls of Lorn were mortal enemies of Bruce after he had murdered Red Comyn because a MacDougall was married to Red Comyn's daughter. A force of MacDougalls, English, and what are called renegade Scots were reported to be coming through the glen which later got the name Glen Sassum (*The Glen of the English*). Donnachaidh deployed his forces to meet them at the point where the glen emerges into the flat lands at the east end of Loch Rannoch. No more details are known about the battle except that it was victory for the Bruce supporters. It was nevertheless an important battle in Rannoch's history because the names connected with it are used to this day. Innerhadden was the name given to the part where the battle started, Dalchosnie means Field of Victory and that name commemorates the battlefield is till the name of a house and estate, and victory was celebrated from the beacon (*Lassintullich*) signaling to all around the success of the local heroes. All these names are current use today.

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The next call to arms occurred shortly after this but this time danger threatened from the north-west. Again, the MacDougalls were leading a war party against the Rannoch supporters of Bruce. Their approach was reported and they camped within sight of Rannoch. Before committing his forces to action Donnachadh decided to see for himself the strength of the foe. So, he dressed up as a traveling packman, a fairly good disguise for those days for such men were frequent visitors to lonely glens. He was able to wander round the MacDougall camp with impunity. However, something made them suspicious for as he was leaving some started to follow him. He had to take to his heels with more and more of the enemy chasing him. According to old accounts they had him trapped at the River Ericht but by making a prodigious leap over the river he was able to escape them. The rocky place where this feat was performed is called after him, Leum Donnachaidh Reamhar (*Fat Duncan's Leap*). The distance was estimated at a standing leap of 16 feet. Unfortunately, there is an Hydro-Electric dam at this spot now.

Duncan now had enough information on which to base his attack, and early next day he put his plan into action. It is not difficult to imagine the surprise caused as he made use of his knowledge of the area to swoop down from the high ground and trap the enemy in the Corrie, in the boggy ground near the burn. Now called The Red Corrie...Corrie Earra Dheargan after the action there. Not only were the MacDougalls defeated but their general, Alexander was captured.

It is a familiar story in the district that Duncan placed his prisoner in the Island Fortress (*now called Isle of the Gulls*) from where he escaped by tricking his captives. When his jailors brought him food, which included a sack of apples he caused them to fall and spill all over the floor. As the jailors were greedily scrambling for them MacDougall is said to have made his escape in their boat and landed safely on the south side at the rock, now called MacDougall's Rock.

When Donnachaidh's men next answered the summons to Fea Corrie it was for a much sterner battle. This was in June 1314 and we read of the route the local forces took on their way to Bannockburn. It was a long journey. Eats of Schichallion, by Ben Lawers to Killin, then by the Pass of Leny to Callander, and thence to Bannockburn. It was the final muster that they acquired the famous crystal that has been the Roberson charm stone to this day. When they were pulling the chief's standard out of the ground a round rock crystal was adhering to it. They carried the Clach na Brataich into battle and have regarded it with reverence ever since. The story tellers of the district tell you that they did so well in the ensuing battle that Bruce approached his old friend Donnachaidh and said, '*You have fought courageously for me. Nor more call yourself Clann Donnachaidh, Children of Duncan but Sons of Robert, my children.*' 'This,' say the story tellers, '*was how Clan Robertson got its name*'.

It is more than likely that the Chief received Bruce's congratulations before he marched back to Rannoch but not his name, because history tells us that the Robertsons got their name some years later from the 4th Chief of the Clan Donnachaidh, Robert Riabhach. Donnachaidh certainly did not return empty handed because he had the Clach na Brataich, the charm stone, and he also had the feeling of pride at having helped his king to success. Both these have been treasured possessions of the Robertsons through the years and have played a significant part in their fortunes. They have been loyal to the Bruces and their descendants, the Stewarts throughout their long history and they have consulted the charm stone at moments of crises before making decisions.

The stone did not bring Donnachaidh's son much good fortune for, although he was loyal supporter of his king, David II, at the Battle of Neville's Cross he was captured and spend many years in a Durham

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jail. He suffered another misfortune in 1392 when he lost a large portion of his land as the result of a clan fight.

This fight occurred because his wife owned land in Angus which he was expecting to acquire, but it went to her nephew Sir David Lindsay instead. Arguments passed back and forth until a meeting was arranged to discuss the matter. It seems that only the Angus men turned up. Thereupon they sent a man to Rannoch to find out the reason for their absence and he "*disappeared*". Accusations followed, the result of which was that the fiery cross was sent round a war party was gathered together. A fearsome band it was because not only did it contain the men of Rannoch but also, Duncan Stewart, the dreaded son of the dreaded Wolf of Badenoch was with them.

He and the young Donnachaidh chiefs (*Robert was too old to go himself*) swept into Angus and laid the country waste. This was said to be their first major battle as a clan, when their motto Garg'n uair dhuiseag which means '*Fierce when roused*' was to be heard. And fierce they must have looked as they swept in with their enormous two-handed claymores nearly as big as themselves. Sir David Lindsay himself was wounded by one. He had a dying Rannoch man pinned to the ground with his lance but man had enough strength to cut through Lindsay's steel boot to the bone.

On their way home, they were pursued by the Angus men who were said to be on horseback and to be wearing chain mail. But in spite of that they were cut to pieces in Strathardle and the Rannoch men returned victorious. However, the Crown decided to punish them and the Chief lost his Aulich lands to the north of Rannoch.

They were soon in favour with the king again for Duncan, the 3rd chief, offered himself in 1406 as ransom with other noble hostages for James I who had been captured by the English. When he returned he became a man of some importance, living at Bunnannoch with the title of Lord of Rannoch. However, it was his successor who regained the lost land and required much more.

James 1st was assassinated in Perth in 1437 and his murderer Sir Robert Graham sought sanctuary in Atholl where he was captured by Robert Riabhach, the 4th Chief of Clan Donnachaidh. Some accounts give the place of his capture as Glenmore, the wild country south of Schichallion. Much more likely is the shelter bed where he was supposed to be surprised at the burn that now has his name Allt Ghramaich (*Graham's Burn*) which flows into Loch Bhac. He was said to have fought ferociously but he had determined opponents, for not only did he have to contend with Robert but also Stewart of Garth joined in the chase. John Graham would without a doubt have fought even harder if he had known what his fate was to be. If he expected mercy from James' Queen; after all James used to call her his '*milk-white dove*', he certainly did not get it. He was nailed to a tree and dragged through the streets; his body was torn with pincers, his son was tortured and beheaded before him, and at length he was put to death.

Robert got the lands back that his father had lost. As well as the lands of Struan, there was Glen Eochty, the two Bohespics, Tummel, Carie, Innerhadden, and much more. He was made Baron of Struan, and to his armorial bearings he had added a '*savage man in chains*' to commemorate his capture of the '*the dastardly traitor*' Sir Robert Graham, and '*a hand supporting a crown*'. It is from this Robert that the Robertsons take their name.

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Other incidents occurred during his time for he frequently led small raiding parties against the rich church lads, frequently to Dunkeld but even to the land of the Bishop of St. Andrews. It was said that when the royal charter was granted to him in 1451 for his part in the Graham affair he was dying of wounds received in one of these raids.

His successors enjoyed a similar existence. Appropriate epithets from then are '*wild*' and '*warlike*'. Alexander, Robert's son is noted for an attack on Dunkeld Cathedral when he and his clansmen chased Bishop Lauder and the worshippers at High Mass. The bishop had been unwise enough to imprison a Robertson for stealing cattle. Although Alexander had a bad reputation it was nothing compared to William, the 6th Chief, who was real tyrant. He was said to terrorise the country. On more than one occasion he was reputed to have 800 men out with him. In spite of the spoils and plunder he brought back from his spreagh he was a rash man for he got into heavy debt and in consequence lost much of his land trying to clear it. But it was his love of fighting that was his undoing. He foolishly took on the Earl of Atholl who was much too strong for him. He was captured and was '*heidit*' without ceremony at Tulliemet in 1516.

It was in 1545 that the next chief was captured by the MacGregors, as wild a bunch as the Robertsons. It is not known what he promised them but he was released to die a quiet death in his bed. Which is more than his successor did. William, the 8th Chief got heavily into debt, lost more of the Robertson lands and was murdered in 1687. Donald the 9th Chief is not recorded as doing anything of note apart from being the father of Robert, the 10th Chief.

Robert unfortunately lived at a time when the ruling monarchs were getting fed up with their unruly subjects in the highlands and steps were taken to restore order in Rannoch...not an easy thing to do in such a place so well fortified by nature. Soldiers were sent in from the garrison at Dunkeld, said to be the King's Guardsmen, but they did not have great success. They only ventured as far as Foss, where they attempted to arrest Neil Stewart. Here Robert came upon them at night. He sent them off as a warning to their fellows on the 18-mile walk home without their horses or their boots. When they said they came on the king's business he said he '*caird not his Majestie*'. James VI then did a wise thing; he charged the Earl of Atholl to answer for '*the present misrule*' of the area. Robert's house at this time was Invervack, just on the doorstep of Blair Castle, and when the Earl rounded up a dozen Robertson clansmen there was nothing Robert could do about it, and for a while the Robertsons were quiet.

There was plenty of action during the time of the next two Chiefs. This was when the religious controversy raged. The great General Montrose was attempting to win Scotland for Charles I against the Covenanters. It is unlikely that the people of Rannoch understood the main issues concerning Episcopacy and Presbyterianism but when fiery cross went around they understood that all right. The Robertson chiefs, always Royalists in spite of Robert the previous chief temporarily falling from grace as we have just seen, they would be only too keen to lend their support, and of course there would be plunder. There was probably plenty of this to bring back to Rannoch because they took part in all the Royalist victories in 1644 and 1645. It was Alexander Robertson of Struan as the 11th Chief was called, who led the clan on these occasions.

In 1650, they were out again but this was a different story. At the Battle of Dunbar, they came under the leadership of a good general, David Leslie, but they were beaten by a better one, Oliver Cromwell. I wonder what the Rannoch men thought of Cromwell's disciplined troops.

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The Earl of Glencairn was in Rannoch in 1653 looking for support for Charles II. He raised the MacGregors from the *'Isle of Rannoch, MacGregors' Hall'* as the historian calls it. He would have no difficulty recruiting them because one of their opponents was the Earl of Argyll, a Campbell, one of their hereditary enemies. At the same time young Alexander, the 12th Robertson Chief led his men from Fea Corrie. Both forces met above Annat and marched up the old path to Loch Garry. History informs us that the leaders quarreled so much amongst themselves that the Cromwell General, General Monk, had little difficulty in winning the ensuing Battle of Dalnaspidal.

Of all the Robertson chiefs, the most individual and the most unlucky was Alexander, the thirteenth baron of his line. Called Struan Robertson was the poet-chief, he was at St. Andrews University when his father died, leaving him as chief. On top of that came news of the revolution. His mother, afraid for him, wrote to his uncles to check this headstrong boy of hers with great possessions to lose from supporting King James. To no avail. He rallied his clansmen; there were said to be 600 of them in the Fea Corrie and the young chieftain led them off to join Bonny Dundee.

The clan was too late to take part in the Battle of Killiecrankie (1689). The highlanders' famous charge had defeated General Mackay but Dundee was dead and the highlanders lost heart without their leader. Mackay soon regained his confidence and scattered the Robertsons as they made towards Perth, and for his share in this young chief was exiled to France.

He was pardoned in 1703 after Queen Anne had ascended the throne and for a dozen years he was good landowner to his clansmen although he was beginning to accrue debts. But when the fight began again in 1715 he was quick to join the Earl of Mar with five hundred of his men behind him. At the Battle of Sheriffmuire the Robertsons saw their leader captured. They rescued him but he was recaptured and he was again exiled to France.

His sister looked after the estates for him until he came back, but he treated her badly, even locking her up on the Island of Rannoch. He never did get on with women of trust them. They say that this was because he found his own mother a terrifying person. She was said to have starved her brother to death so that she could ensure the succession, and it is a tradition in Rannoch that *'as often as she went to ride or walk, the crows followed her in great numbers, making a hideous croaking as if upbraiding her guilt'*. In one of his poems which he wrote about his home, the Hermitage at Dunalastair he said

*'In this small spot whose paradise you'll see
With all its plants but the forbidden Tree;
Here every sort of animal you'll find
Subdu'd, but Woman who betray'd Mankind.'*

And yet it was women who came to his aid when a persistent creditor accosted him at Carie and demanded payment. The women of the neighbourhood seized the man, stripped him naked and kept him under the spout of the mill-wheel till the poor creature was almost killed with cold. For this the chieftain was tried at Perth, but acquitted for want of evidence.

By the time that Prince Charles landed in Scotland in 1745 Struan was seventy-five. Still, he set off on his third rebellion. A hundred or so Robertsons went with him. He got as far as Presonpans where his

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men joined the Athollmen. He saw the victory and was driven back to Rannoch in Sir John Cope's captured carriage.

After the defeat of Prince Charlie at Culloden the government seems to have felt that this last escapade of Old Robertson's was too harmless to punish him although the Struan estates were taken over by them. He died at Carie in 1749 from where his body was escorted by two thousand men 18 miles through Robertson country to be buried at Struan.

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