

*Notes for comments by Ian C. MacLeod at Clan MacLeod
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WAR OF THE ONE-EYED WOMAN

The last major battle between the MacLeods and MacDonalds on Skye seems to have been in 1601, over 400 years ago, in the “War of One Eyed Woman”. Here is a little piece that I wrote on that for the Canadian Clan MacLeod newsletter (The Leod Voice) in the Fall 2009 Issue:

The history of the Isle of Skye was dominated by the histories of the MacDonalds and the MacLeods, often in bloody conflict.

In 1480, John MacDonald and his illegitimate son, Angus Og (or Black Angus MacDonald) battled for the chieftainship of Clan Donald. At the Battle of Bloody Bay, William Dubh MacLeod was supporting John, but was wounded and taken prisoner (and died shortly after). Black Angus won. After the battle, the MacDonalds, under Black Angus, raided northern Skye in revenge for MacLeod’s part in supporting John. This began about 120 years of particularly vicious battles and bloodshed between the two great clans.

Perhaps the worst of the vicious bloodletting led to the “Battle of the Spoiling of the Dyke”, in 1578. The MacLeods had raided the MacDonald-held Isle of Eigg a couple of years previously, and massacred hundreds of MacDonalds in the cave that was used as the place of worship. In revenge, the MacDonalds of Uist landed on Skye and barred the doors of Trumpan Church in Waternish, when it was full of worshippers, then set the church on fire. (Some stories suggest that the victims, in each case, were actually first herded into the cave / church before it was set afire.) No one escaped – except one girl who though fatally wounded managed to sound the alarm. The MacLeod chief then set off for Ardmore Bay and caught up with, and attacked, the MacDonald raiders. Almost every MacDonald was killed in the ensuing battle. The corpses were dragged into a turf dyke, giving the battle its name as the Battle of the Spoiling of the Dyke.

Tradition has it that the Fairy Flag was unfurled twice, but the stories vary as to when. On at least one occasion, it was unfurled in one of the ongoing battles with the MacDonalds during this period – either 1490 or 1520. The MacLeods carried the day, in each case (the other unfurling may have been during a time of famine).

Sometime in the 1590s, an attempt was made to mend the rivalry when Margaret, sister of Rory Mor MacLeod (15th Chief, Chief from 1595 to 1626) wed Donald Gorm Mor MacDonald. At that time, it was the custom in the Highlands for a marriage to have a trial period of one year, a tradition known as “hand-fasting”, or “left-handed marriage”. If the trial worked (to the satisfaction of the man, of course!) the marriage would become formal, and any children legitimized. If not, the trial could be terminated. Margaret bore no children. Sometime during the “trial year” she lost an eye. When the year was up, Donald MacDonald sent her back, on a one-eyed horse, led by a one-eyed man and accompanied by a one-eyed dog. Not surprisingly, Chief Rory Mor was outraged, and a

new war began between the clans, called the “War of the One-Eyed Woman”. This culminated in 1601 in a battle in Coire na Creiche (the corrie of the spoils), beneath the Cuillins, when both clans suffered heavy losses.

The MacDonalds seem to have won the battle, but the MacLeods point to the fact that Rory Mor MacLeod was not personally present at the fight and argue that this was the reason the MacDonalds won the day. In any case, it was the last battle fought between the two clans. (One note has it that Margaret went on to become a nun.)

And quick follow-up (same day): Our ancestors were certainly a wild and vicious lot. In fact, in the early 2000s, I recall listening to a BBC reporter in Afghanistan at the beginning of the Afghan War. He commented that the tribal warlords in the north of Afghanistan were not unlike the Highland Chiefs of 400 or 500 years earlier. Needless to say, the reporter was British (but he may have been right!).
