

WHO ARE THE MCASKILL'S ? WHAT IS THEIR CONNECTION WITH THE MCLEOD'S ?

The name, like McLeod is of Norse origin and is derived from the personal name Askell (for Asketill, *'the kettle or sacrificial vessel of the Anses, ' i.e. the Gods)*

The McAskill's came to Britain with an invasion fleet about 1,000 years ago and first settled in Ireland but following a feud they moved to Skye. In those times the Hebrides belonged to the Kingdom of Man and the Isles owing ultimate allegiance to the King of Norway. According to tradition the King of Man appointed the McAskills keepers of Dunscaith Castle across at Sleat.

When Norse rule ended in 1266 the McAskills threw in their lot with the McLeods. They served them both as *commodores of their galleys and wardens of the clan coastline.* At a very early date a branch of the family, headed by Black Donald, occupied the fortified headland of Rubh' an Dunian and it's adjacent pasture land. They held these lands from the McLeods in exchange for their watchkeeping duties. The McAskills distinguished themselves in the clan battles of old and much of the fighting took place in the Minginish area. The last great clan fight was fought in the upper reaches of Glenbrittle just a short distance from the McAskill stronghold at the Rhu. This was the battle of Ben Coolin and the year was 1601.

For many generations the McAskills were the lieutenants of McLeod of Dunvegan on land and sea and commanded his galleys. One of them always accompanied the Chief clad in full armour.

They distinguished themselves in many battles. One of these being the battle of Glendale (1490) when McAskill cut down the leader of the opposing McDonald clan who in turn mobbed him and cut him down. *In recognition for his services it was declared that the McAskills were granted the distinction of having a warrior specially carved upon their tombs.*

In the more peaceful days that followed they turned to farming and were very successful at it, being the first tacksmen class on Skye to export their cattle to the South. By 1700 seven farms were held by family members with rents between eight pounds fifteen shillings and four pence and eleven pounds five shillings and ten pence. Early in the 19th century one Kenneth McAskill was the first to introduce sheep to the area and by 1811 his farm was measured as 442 acres of arable land and 26,835 acres of pasture with an annual rent of 700 pounds (payable to McLeod). In 1825 Hugh McAskill founded a whisky distillery at Tallisker which is still operating and is the only whisky distillery on Skye. By 1850 the Rhundunan farm was run by Hugh it now extended to 37,500 acres, employed 70 men and attracted a rent of 1,200 pounds. Hugh died in 1863 and was the last McAskill to hold the lands of Rhundunan. In the family burial ground at Eynort his headstone records, *'Erected by public subscription to commemorate the important position long held by Hugh McAskill in the business and social life of Skye, and the respect and affection entertained for him and his wife'*

SOME ANECDOTES

For having defended the McLeods through many battles the McAskills were given the use of the lands of Rhudh an Dunain and were also said to have land in other parts of the McLeod estates. When the need for defence diminished they found themselves paying rent for land that they had lived on and defended for centuries.

About 1391. The relationship between the Lord of the Isles (McDonald) and the McLeods of Dunvegan was far from happy and the main source of the trouble was over territories. A bloody Battle was fought at the head of Lock Sligachan and the McDonalds were defeated with great loss. The two leaders of the fight were Tormod Coil the son of Murdoch McLeod of Gesto and one of the McAskills. The latter seized the enemy's galleys cutting off their retreat. The heads of the leaders of the slain McDonalds were taken to Dunvegan and there exhibited.

Murdoch McLeod of Gesto and his brother in law, McAskill of Ebost, were drinking together at Gesto, they quarrelled about a remark that McAskill made about his sister, who was Murdoch's wife. They were drunk and strong words were followed by a duel. During the duel McAskill's sword stuck in a beam in the roof and Murdoch did not realise it in time to stop his lunge, and killed him.

1510

A McLeod galley with a crew of thirty to fifty men including the foster brother of William 13th Chief, and a member of the McAskills, the favoured followers of the McLeods, were forced by bad weather to take refuge at the island of Eigg. The men were refused provisions although they offered to pay, so they seized the cattle which they killed and cooked. While they were eating they were surrounded by the Macdonald's, McAskill and two others were brutally mutilated and set adrift in a 'crazy boat' without oars or rudder and all their companions were killed. By good fortune the boat with McAskill and the two others drifted to Skye. When they told Alasdair Crotach what had happened he solemnly swore that he would not change his clothes till he had killed every sole of Clanranald on Eigg, Canna and Rhum. He and his son William set sail for Eigg with six galleys and some hundreds of men. When the inhabitants heard of their coming they concealed themselves in a great cave with a secret entrance. The McLeods searched the island for three days and could not find their victims but at last a man was seen observing their movements. There had been a slight fall of snow and William with a band of men traced him to the cave. It was decided to light a fire at the mouth of the cave and smother all within. Alasdair sailed away and left William to build a light the fire. He was ever after known as William of the cave.

1650

Word came to Callum Beg McAskill of the Rhundunan family, that some of the Camerons were driving of some of the Glenelg peoples cattle. He hurried to intercept and caught one but while he was binding him the man managed to stab him fatally. The thieves realising they were guilty of murder abandoned the cattle and fled homewards. News of the murder was sent to McLeod of McLeod and he sent a courier to Lochiel demanding the surrender of the men. Lochiel offered 100 guineas in exchange for the lives of his men. McLeods reply was that if the murderers were skinned and these skins filled with guineas it would not compensate for the life of his vassal, (a person who holds land from a feudal lord and receives protection in return for homage and allegiance). In the end Lochiel surrendered his men to the very spot where the crime took place and there they were hanged on an oak tree which was known as Craobha a Chrochidh (tree of the hanging).

1777

The Chiefs of the clans drew up documents to try and save the ancient lands occupied by the clans. The agreements were signed by thirty five tenants of whom nineteen were McLeod's and among the others were such ancient adherents of the Chiefs as McAskill, McSween Campbell Stroud and Ensay. This agreement hangs as an honoured possession on the walls of Dunvegan Castle.

Donald Dubh Frustrates a Raid

Among the more dauntless Lieutenants of the Coast at Rudh' an Dunain was Donald Dubh MacAskill. (c1300) Commonly known as Black Donald MacAskill. Donald was very adept in the use of the bow.

One day Donald perceived a Clan Ranald barge in the Sound of Canna as if making preparations for a raid on McLeod's country. As the barge drew nearer to Rudh' an Dunain, Donald recognised it to be on plunder intent and that it was manned by twelve sturdy MacDonalds. So he crept into the *dun* to collect an ample supply of arrows and then hid behind a rock from which he fired twelve arrows that killed twelve rowers. And soon the Clan Ranald barge with it's lifeless crew came ashore and was smashed against the rocks

William McAskill was a foster brother to the Chief of McLeod and he distinguished himself when the Frasers made their first raid (This raid is not mentioned in any history of the Fraser's). He was acting as SENESCHAL (an official in a medieval noble household in charge of domestic arrangements and the administration of the servants) of Dunvegan and he with six brothers attacked the Fraser's in a wood as they were making their way home laden with spoil, and routed them.

The old school house at Soay also served as a church. In 1871 Rev John McPhail found that the class room was fitted up with both pulpit and pews. "The furnishings of some ruinous chapel in a district from which the people had been cleared away". The men of Soay thought that they could put the timber to better account and on one of their fishing expeditions they carried the whole of it away with them and put it in the school. For such lawlessness terrible things were at first to be done to them. But when the matter was more calmly considered they were allowed to pass unpunished.

Alexander McAskill of Soay was to give the Napier Commission his own version of this story. *"There was this old church which was destroyed. We took a piece of the old pulpit and one or two pews. The landlord belonged to the Established Church and sent us to Portree. I went there, lost two days, and was sent to Edinburgh, and the authorities there were so kind to us that we were not out of lodgings until we came home"*.

What Alexander didn't tell them was that the men of Soay were in fact lodged in the Carlton Jail for a spell before being released on payment of a fine.

The Robber Woman of Rudh' an Dunain.

In the early 1700's the inhabitants of Glen Bretil were sorely oppressed by the cruelties of a strong powerful woman who begged from door to door. She was an unholy terror and rather than provoke her the poorer people parted cringingly with whatever she demanded. One day Iain Mor MacAskill's Mother was working in her shieling when she was confronted by the robber woman. An argument ensued and Iain's mother was killed and the robber woman fled to the hills. Iain Mor at this time was Lieutenant of the Coast at Rudh' an Dunain against the invasion of the Clan Ranald. One day after church as the people were standing around talking in front of the old church at Eynort, Iain Mor was confronted by the robber woman who coolly informed him that she had been hearing of the threats he had uttered against her.

But Iain Mor, a man of few words and on this occasion in a mood for anything but an argie-bargie swiftly drew his sword and beheaded her in the presence of the people assembled round the door of the church.

Iain Mor was hailed as a hero for putting an end to the woman who for years had kept Glen Bretil and Rudh' an Dunain in a constant state of terror.

The walls of this church and cemetery known as the McAskill burial ground still stand . The writer was privileged to visit this area a few years ago, and probably stood on the spot where the beheading took place.

At the 2nd battle of Inverlochy (at a time when Iain 6th Chief was suffering from the wound he received at the battle of Harlow) the combined forces of Siol Tormod and Sol Torquil were commanded by the Chief of Lewis but under him a McAskill led the men of Dunvegan

Regaled with Bread and Cheese and Whisky

Another Lieutenant of the Coast *Mac Dhomhnuill Diubh*—Son of Black Donald. In the course of his duties this Lieutenant apprehended a man who previously had been convicted of an endless series of crimes, including murder, cattle lifting, and fire raising. The Son of Black Donald did not detain him long in enthrallment, but tried him on the spot. Before the execution took place however, he brought the prisoner to his own house and regaled him extravagantly with bread and cheese, and filled his quaich with whisky many times, that he might be the more hardened for his last experience on earth.

Thereafter he marched him up a steep brae above the sea and with his own sword cut off his head.

This is a typical incident in the ancient government of the MacLeod's Country

Gormul's Whereabouts Revealed

Many years had past since Gormul mysteriously disappeared from her home in Bracadale. Her fate was unknown until a sailor, Allan McAskill, returned from a long sea voyage and was able to relate a most unusual story to her family.

Allan happened to be sailing on an English vessel that was wrecked by a cyclone on one of the islands of the Antilles in the West Indies. The shipwrecked crew were treated kindly by the native population and were invited to the chateau of the Spanish nobleman who ruled the island. Having heard sailors tales about the lady of the house they were anxious to meet her but she did not appear during the evenings entertainment. However Allan did hear the low voice of a woman murmuring entreaties in a language not understood by the West Indians. So one evening after vesper time he stole into the Castle grounds and secluded himself within listening distance of the mournful monologue. What he heard was a Gaelic prayer of remembrance for McLeod's shieling on Ben Duagraich in Bracadale, a sigh for unseen faces and a secret sob for a breath of the hills of home.

It came to the lady's ears that there was a Scottish sailor among the shipwrecked crew that spoke an unintelligible tongue. She sent for him and on seeing him she burst into ecstasies of joy, for who was he but Allan McAskill, her playmate in tender years. Gormul told Allan how she and other girls from the Outer Isles were taken on board a pirate ship and she was sold to the Spanish chief who was now her husband and he ruled this West Indian island.

As the wife of a Spanish nobleman Gormul was a person of some standing in the West Indies. At first not altogether happy with her new surroundings, she now filled her place admirably and was happy with her situation. As much as she would like to visit her native island again she could not forsake her duties, but whenever the opportunity arose she sent gifts to her kinfolk in the wind-swept Isle of Skye.

Gormul died a Spanish subject in the West Indies.