

Mackay

Source: The Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans and Highland Regiments, Volume II (of 2) by Sir John Scott Keltie

Mackay, or Siol Mhorgan—Mackays of Clan-Abrach—Bighouse—Strathy—Melness—Kinloch—Mackays of Holland—Macnicol—Sutherland—Gunn—Maclaurin or Maclaren—Macrae—Buchanan—“The King of Kippen”—Buchanan of Auchmar—Colquhoun—Macgregors and Macfarlanes in Dumbartonshire—Forbes—Forbes of Tolquhoun—Craigievar—Pitsligo and Fettercairn—Culloden—Urquhart.

The most northern mainland county of Scotland is that of Caithness, and the principal clan inhabiting this district is the important[266] one of Mackay, or the siol Mhorgan. With regard to Caithness, Mr Skene says—“The district of Caithness was originally of much greater extent than the modern county of that name, as it included the whole of the extensive and mountainous district of Strathnaver. Towards the middle of the tenth century the Norwegian Jarl of Orkney obtained possession of this province, and with the exception of a few short intervals, it continued to form a part of his extensive territories for a period of nearly two hundred years. The district of Strathnaver, which formed the western portion of the ancient district of Caithness, differed very much in appearance from the rest of it, exhibiting indeed the most complete contrast which could well be conceived, for while the eastern division was in general low, destitute of mountains, and altogether of a Lowland character, Strathnaver possessed the characteristics of the rudest and most inaccessible of Highland countries; the consequence of this was, that while the population of Caithness proper became speedily and permanently Norse, that of Strathnaver must, from the nature of the country, have remained in a great measure Gaelic; and this distinction between the two districts is very strongly marked throughout the Norse Sagas, the eastern part being termed simply Katenesi, while Strathnaver, on the other hand, is always designated ‘Dölum a Katenesi,’ or the Glens of Caithness. That the population of Strathnaver remained Gaelic we have the distinct authority of the Sagas, for they inform us that the Dölum, or glens, were inhabited by the ‘Gaddgedli,’ a word plainly signifying some tribe of the Gael, as in the latter syllable we recognise the word Gaedil or Gael, which at all events shews that the population of that portion was not Norse.”

“The oldest Gaelic clan which we find in possession of this part of the ancient district of Caithness is the clan Morgan or Mackay.”

The accounts of the origin of the Mackays are various. In the MS. of 1450, there is no reference to it, although mention is made of the Mackays of Kintyre, who were called of Ugadale. These, however, were vassals of the Isles, and had no connection with the Mackays of Strathnaver. Pennant assigns to them a Celto-Irish descent, in the 12th century, after King William the Lion had defeated Harald, Earl of Orkney and Caithness, and taken possession of these districts. Mr Skene[228] supposes that they were descended from what he calls the aboriginal Gaelic inhabitants of Caithness. The Norse Sagas state that about the beginning of the twelfth century, “there lived in the Dölum of Katenesi (or Strathnaver) a man named Moddan, a noble and rich man,” and that his sons were Magnus Orfi and Ottar, the Jarl in Thurso. The title of jarl was the same as the Gaelic maormor, and Mr Skene is of opinion that Moddan and his son Ottar were the Gaelic maormors of Caithness.

Sir Robert Gordon, in his History of Sutherland (p. 302), from a similarity of badge and armorial bearings, accounts the clan Mackay a branch of the Forbeses, but this is by no means probable. Mr Smibert is of opinion that the Mackays took their name from the old Catti of Caithness, and that the chiefs were of the Celto-Irish stock. This, however, is a very improbable supposition. Whatever may have been the origin of the chiefs, there is every reason to believe that the great body of the clan Mackay originally belonged to the early Celtic population of Scotland, although, from their[267] proximity to the Norse immigrants, it is not at all improbable that latterly the two races became largely blended. As we have already, in the first part of the work, had occasion to enter somewhat minutely into the early history of this important clan, it will be unnecessary to enter into lengthened detail in this place, although it will be

scarcely possible to avoid some slight repetition. We must refer the reader for details to the earlier chapters of the general history.

Alexander, who is said to have been the first of the family, aided in driving the Danes from the north. His son, Walter, chamberlain to Adam, bishop of Caithness, married that prelate's daughter, and had a son, Martin, who received from his maternal grandfather certain church lands in Strathnaver, being the first of the family who obtained possessions there. Martin had a son, Magnus or Manus, who fought at Bannockburn under Bruce, and had two sons, Morgan and Farquhar. From Morgan the clan derived their Gaelic name of Clan-wic-Worgan, or Morgan, and from Farquhar were descended the Clan-wic-Farquhar in Strathnaver.

Donald, Morgan's son, married a daughter of Macneill of Gigha, who was named Iye, and had a son of the same name, in Gaelic Aodh, pronounced like Y or I.

Aodh had a son, another Donald, called Donald Macaodh, or Mackaoi, and it is from this son that the clan has acquired the patronymic of Mackay. He and his son were killed in the castle of Dingwall, by William, Earl of Sutherland, in 1395. The Mackays, however, were too weak to take revenge, and a reconciliation took place between Robert, the next earl, and Angus Mackay, the eldest of Donald's surviving sons, of whom there were other two, viz., Houcheon Dubh, and Neill. Angus, the eldest son, married a sister of Malcolm Macleod of the Lewis, and had by her two sons, Angus Dubh, that is, dark-complexioned, and Roderick Gald, that is, Lowland. On their father's death, their uncle, Houcheon Dubh, became their tutor, and entered upon the management of their lands.

In 1411, when Donald, Lord of the Isles, in prosecution of his claim to the earldom of Ross, burst into Sutherland, he was attacked at Dingwall, by Angus Dubh, or Black Angus Mackay. The latter, however, was defeated and taken prisoner, and his brother, Roriegald, and many of his men were slain. After a short confinement, Angus was released by the Lord of the Isles, who, desirous of cultivating the alliance of so powerful a chief, gave him his daughter, Elizabeth, in marriage, and with her bestowed upon him many lands by charter in 1415. He was called Enneas-en-Imprissi, or "Angus the Absolute," from his great power. At this time, we are told, Angus Dubh could bring into the field 4000 fighting men.

Angus Dubh, with his four sons, was arrested at Inverness by James I. After a short confinement, Angus was pardoned and released with three of them, the eldest, Neill Mackay, being kept as a hostage for his good behaviour. Being confined in the Bass at the mouth of the Firth of Forth, he was ever after called Neill Wasse (or Bass) Mackay.

In 1437, Neill Wasse Mackay was released from confinement in the Bass, and on assuming the chiefship, he bestowed on John Aberigh, for his attention to his father, the lands of Lochnaver, in fee simple, which were long possessed by his posterity, that particular branch of the Mackays, called the Sliochd-ean-Aberigh, or an-Abrach. Neill Wasse, soon after his accession, ravaged Caithness, but died the same year, leaving two sons, Angus, and John Roy Mackay, the latter founder of another branch, called the Sliochd-ean-Roy.

Angus Mackay, the elder son, assisted the Keiths in invading Caithness in 1464, when they defeated the inhabitants of that district in an engagement at Blaretannie. He was burnt to death in the church of Tarbet in 1475, by the men of Ross, whom he had often molested. With a daughter, married to Sutherland of Dilred, he had three sons, viz., John Reawigh, meaning yellowish red, the colour of his hair; Y-Roy Mackay; and Neill Naverigh Mackay. To revenge his father's death, John Reawigh Mackay, the eldest son, raised a large force, and assisted by Robert Sutherland, uncle to the Earl of Sutherland, invaded Strathoikell, and laid waste the lands of the Rosses in that district. A battle took place, 11th July 1487,[268] at Aldy-Charrish, when the Rosses were defeated, and their chief, Alexander Ross of Balnagowan, and seventeen other principal men of that clan were slain. The victors returned home with a large booty. It was by forays such as these that the great Highland chiefs, and even some of the Lowland nobles, contrived, in former times, to increase their stores and add to their possessions, and the Mackays about this time obtained a large accession to their lands by a circumstance narrated in the former part of this history, connected with Alexander Sutherland of

Dilred, nephew of Y-Roy Mackay, the then chief.

In 1516, Y-Roy Mackay gave his bond of service to Adam Gordon of Aboyne, brother of the Earl of Huntly, who had become Earl of Sutherland, by marriage with Elizabeth, sister and heiress of the ninth earl, but died soon after. Donald, his youngest son, slain at Morinsh, was ancestor of a branch of the Mackays called the Sliochd-Donald-Mackay. John, the eldest son, had no sooner taken possession of his father's lands, than his uncle, Neill Naverigh Mackay and his two sons, assisted by a force furnished them by the Earl of Caithness, entered Strathnaver, and endeavoured unsuccessfully to dispossess him of his inheritance.

In 1517, in the absence of the Earl of Sutherland, who had wrested from John Mackay a portion of his lands, he and his brother Donald invaded Sutherland with a large force. But after several reverses, John Mackay submitted to the Earl of Sutherland in 1518, and granted him his bond of service. But such was his restless and turbulent disposition that he afterwards prevailed upon Alexander Sutherland, the bastard, who had married his sister and pretended a claim to the earldom, to raise the standard of insurrection against the earl. After this he again submitted to the earl, and a second time gave him his bond of service and manrent in 1522. He died in 1529, and was succeeded by his brother, Donald.

In 1539, Donald Mackay obtained restitution of the greater part of the family estates, which had been seized by the Sutherland Gordons, and in 1542 he was present in the engagement at Solway Moss. Soon after, he committed various ravages in Sutherland, but after a considerable time, became reconciled to the earl, to whom he again gave his bond of service and manrent on 8th April 1549. He died in 1550. He was succeeded by his son, Y-Mackay, who, with the Earl of Caithness, was perpetually at strife with the powerful house of Sutherland, and so great was his power, and so extensive his spoliations, that in the first parliament of James VI. (Dec. 1567), the lords of the articles were required to report, "By what means might Mackay be dantoned." He died in 1571, full of remorse, it is said, for the wickedness of his life.

His son, Houcheon, or Hugh, succeeded him when only eleven years old. In 1587, he joined the Earl of Caithness, when attacked by the Earl of Sutherland, although the latter was his superior. He was excluded from the temporary truce agreed to by the two earls in March of that year, and in the following year they came to a resolution to attack him together. Having received secret notice of their intention from the Earl of Caithness, he made his submission to the Earl of Sutherland, and ever after remained faithful to him.

Of the army raised by the Earl of Sutherland in 1601, to oppose the threatened invasion of his territories by the Earl of Caithness, the advance guard was commanded by Patrick Gordon of Gartay and Donald Mackay of Scourie, and the right wing by Hugh Mackay. Hugh Mackay died at Tongue, 11th September 1614, in his 55th year. He was connected with both the rival houses by marriage; his first wife being Lady Elizabeth Sinclair, second daughter of George, fourth Earl of Caithness, and relict of Alexander Sutherland of Duffus; and his second, Lady Jane Gordon, eldest daughter of Alexander, eleventh Earl of Sutherland. The former lady was drowned, and left a daughter. By the latter he had two sons, Sir Donald Mackay of Far, first Lord Reay, and John, who married in 1619, a daughter of James Sinclair of Murkle, by whom he had Hugh Mackay and other children. Sir Donald Mackay of Far, the elder son, was, by Charles I., created a peer of Scotland, by the title of Lord Reay, by patent, dated 20th June 1628, to him and his heirs male[269] whatever. From him the land of the Mackays in Sutherland acquired the name of "Lord Reay's Country," which it has ever since retained.

On the breaking out of the civil wars, Lord Reay, with the Earl of Sutherland and others, joined the Covenanters on the north of the river Spey. He afterwards took arms in defence of Charles I., and in 1643 arrived from Denmark, with ships and arms, and a large sum of money, for the service of the king. He was in Newcastle in 1644, when that town was stormed by the Scots, and being made prisoner, was conveyed to Edinburgh tolbooth. He obtained his release after the battle of Kilsyth in August 1645, and embarked at Thurso in July 1648 for Denmark, where he died in February 1649. He married, first, in 1610, Barbara, eldest daughter of Kenneth, Lord Kintail, and had by her Y-Mackay, who died in 1617; John, second Lord Reay, two other sons and two daughters. By a second wife, Rachel Winterfield or

Harrison, he had two sons, the Hon. Robert Mackay Forbes and the Hon. Hugh Forbes. Of this marriage he procured a sentence of nullity, and then took to wife Elizabeth, daughter of Robert Thomson of Greenwich, but in 1637 was ordained to pay his second wife £2,000 sterling for part maintenance, and £3,000 sterling yearly during his non-adherence. By Elizabeth Thomson he had one daughter.

John, second Lord Reay, joined the royalists under the Earl of Glencairn in 1654, and was taken at Balveny and imprisoned. By his wife, a daughter of Donald Mackay of Scourie, he had three sons; 1. Donald, master of Reay, who predeceased his father, leaving by his wife Ann, daughter of Sir George Munro of Culcairn, a son, George, third Lord Reay; 2. The Hon. Brigadier-General Æneas Mackay, who married Margaretta, Countess of Puchlor; and 3. The Hon. Colin Mackay. Æneas, the second son, was colonel of the Mackay Dutch regiment. His family settled at the Hague, where they obtained considerable possessions, and formed alliances with several noble families. Their representative, Berthold Baron Mackay, died 26th December 1854, at his chateau of Ophemert, in Guelderland, aged eighty-one. He married the Baroness Van Renasse Van Wilp, and his eldest son, the Baron Æneas Mackay, at one time chamberlain to the king of Holland, became next heir to the peerage of Reay, after the present family.

George, third Lord Reay, F.R.S., took the oaths and his seat in parliament, 29th October 1700. In the rebellion of 1715, he raised his clan in support of the government. In 1719, when the Earls Marischal and Seaforth, and the Marquis of Tullibardine, with 300 Spaniards, landed in the Western Highlands, he did the same, and also in 1745. He died at Tongue, 21st March 1748. He was thrice married, and had by his first wife, one son, Donald, fourth Lord Reay.

Donald, fourth Lord Reay, succeeded his father in 1748, and died at Durness, 18th August 1761. He was twice married, and, with one daughter, the Hon. Mrs Edgar, had two sons, George, fifth Lord Reay, who died at Rosebank, near Edinburgh, 27th February 1768, and Hugh, sixth lord. The fifth Lord Reay was also twice married, but had issue only by his second wife, a son, who died young, and three daughters. Hugh, his half-brother, who succeeded him, was for some years in a state of mental imbecility. He died at Skerry, 26th January 1797, unmarried, when the title devolved on Eric Mackay, son of the Hon. George Mackay of Skibo, third son of the third Lord Reay. He died at Tongue, June 25, 1782. By his wife, Anne, third daughter of Hon. Eric Sutherland, only son of the attainted Lord Duffus, he had five sons and four daughters. His eldest son, George, died in 1790. Eric, the second son, became seventh Lord Reay. Alexander, the next, an officer in the army, succeeded as eighth Lord Reay. Donald Hugh, the fourth son, a vice-admiral, died March 26, 1850. Patrick, the youngest, died an infant.

Eric, seventh Lord Reay, was, in 1806, elected one of the representative Scots peers. He died, unmarried, July 8, 1847, and was succeeded, as eighth Lord Reay, by his brother, Alexander, barrack-master at Malta, born in 1775. He married in 1809, Marion, daughter of Colonel Goll, military secretary to Warren Hastings, and relict of David Ross, Esq. of Calcutta, eldest son of the Scottish judge, [270] Lord Ankerville; he had two sons and six daughters. He died in 1863, and was succeeded by his second son, Eric, who was born in 1813, George, the eldest son, having died in 1811.

The Mackays became very numerous in the northern counties, and the descent of their chiefs, in the male line, has continued unbroken from their first appearance in the north down to the present time. In the county of Sutherland, they multiplied greatly also, under other names, such as MacPhail, Polson, Bain, Nielson, &c. The names of Mackie and MacGhie are also said to be derived from Mackay. The old family of MacGhie of Balmaghie, which for about 600 years possessed estates in Galloway, used the same arms as the chief of the Mackays. They continued in possession of their lands till 1786. Balmaghie means Mackay town. The name MacCrie is supposed to be a corruption of MacGhie.

At the time of the rebellion of 1745, the effective force of the Mackays was estimated at 800 men by President Forbes. It is said that in the last Sutherland fencibles, raised in 1793 and disbanded in 1797, there were 33 John Mackays in one company alone. In 1794 the Reay fencibles, 800 strong, were raised in a few weeks, in "Lord Reay's country," the residence of the clan Mackay. The names of no fewer than 700 of them had the prefix Mac.

With regard to the term Siol Mhorgan applied to the clan Mackay, it is right to state that Mr Robert Mackay of Thurso, the family historian, denies that as a clan they were ever known by that designation, which rests, he says, only on the

affirmation of Sir Robert Gordon, without any authority. He adds: "There are, indeed, to this day, persons of the surname Morgan and Morganach, who are understood to be of the Mackays, but that the whole clan, at any period, went under that designation, is incorrect; and those of them who did so, were always few and of but small account. The name seems to be of Welsh origin; but how it obtained among the Mackays it is impossible now to say."

Of the branches of the clan Mackay, the family of Scourie is the most celebrated. They were descended from Donald Mackay of Scourie and Eriboll, elder son of Y Mackay III., chief of the clan from 1550 to 1571, by his first wife, a daughter of Hugh Macleod of Assynt.

Donald Mackay, by his wife, Euphemia, daughter of Hugh Munro of Assynt in Ross, brother of the laird of Foulis, had three sons and four daughters. The sons were Hugh, Donald, and William. Hugh, the eldest, succeeded his father, and by the Scots Estates was appointed colonel of the Reay countrymen. He married a daughter of James Corbet of Rheims, by whom he had five sons, William, Hector, Hugh, the celebrated General Mackay,[229] commander of the government forces at the battle of Killiecrankie, James and Roderick. He had also three daughters, Barbara, married to John, Lord Reay; Elizabeth, to Hugh Munro of Eriboll, and Ann, to the Hon. Capt. William Mackay of Kinloch. William and Hector, the two eldest sons, both unmarried, met with untimely deaths. In February 1688, the Earl of Caithness, whose wife was younger than himself, having conceived some jealousy against William, caused him to be seized at Dunnet, while on his way to Orkney, with a party of 30 persons. He was conveyed to Thurso, where he was immured in a dungeon, and after long confinement was sent home in an open boat, and died the day after. In August of the same year, his brother, Hector, accompanied by a servant, having gone to Aberdeenshire, on his way to Edinburgh, was waylaid and murdered by William Sinclair of Dunbeath and John Sinclair of Murkle, and their two servants. A complaint was immediately raised before the justiciary, at the instance of John, Earl of Sutherland, and the relatives of the deceased, against the Earl of Caithness and the two Sinclairs for these crimes. A counter complaint was brought by Caithness against the pursuers, for several alleged crimes from 1649 downwards, but a compromise took place between the parties.

General Mackay's only son, Hugh, major of his father's regiment, died at Cambray, in 1708, aged about 28. He left two sons, Hugh and Gabriel, and a daughter. Hugh died at[271] Breda, a lieutenant-general in the Dutch service, and colonel of the Mackay Dutch regiment, which took its name from his father. He had an only daughter, the wife of lieutenant-general Prevost, of the British service, who, on the death of his father-in-law, without male issue, obtained the king's license to bear the name and arms of Mackay of Scourie in addition to his own, which his descendants in Holland still bear. Gabriel, the younger son, lieutenant-colonel of the Mackay regiment, died without issue. James, the next brother of General Mackay, a lieutenant-colonel in his regiment, was killed at Killiecrankie, and Roderick, the youngest, died in the East Indies, both unmarried.

The eldest branch of the Mackays was that of the Clan-Abrach, descended from John Aberigh Mackay, second son of Angus Dubh, who received the lands of Auchness, Breachat, and others, from his brother, Neill Wasse. Of this family was Robert Mackay, writer, Thurso, historian of the clan Mackay. According to this gentleman, John Aberigh, the first of this branch, gave his name to the district of Strathnaver. In the Gaelic language, he says, the inhabitants of Strathnaver are called Naverigh, and that tribe the Sliochd-nan-Aberigh. John, their founder, some say, took his appellation of Aberigh from Lochaber, where he resided in his youth with some relatives, and from Strath-na-Aberich the transition is natural to Strath-n'-Averich. Neill Naverich, above mentioned, was so called from his having belonged to the Reay Country, that is, Strathnaver. The Clan-Abrach were the most numerous and powerful branch of the Mackays. They acted as wardens of their country, and never betrayed their trust.

The Bighouse branch were descendants of William Mackay of Far, younger half-brother of Donald Mackay of Scourie, by his second wife, Christian Sinclair, daughter of the laird of Dun.

The Strathy branch sprung from John Mackay of Dilred and Strathy, brother of the first Lord Reay, and son of Hugh Mackay of Far, by his wife, Lady Jane Gordon, eldest daughter of Alexander, Earl of Sutherland.

The Melness branch came from the Hon. Colonel Æneas Mackay, second son of the first Lord Reay, by his first wife, the Hon. Barbara Mackenzie, daughter of Lord Kintail.

The Kinloch branch descended from the Hon. Captain William Mackay, and the Sandwood branch from the Hon. Charles Mackay, sons of the first Lord Reay by his last wife, Marjory Sinclair, daughter of Francis Sinclair of Stircoke.

The founder of the Holland branch of the Mackays, General Hugh Mackay, prior to 1680, when a colonel in the Dutch service, and having no prospect of leaving Holland, wrote for some of his near relatives to go over and settle in that country. Amongst those were his brother, James, and his nephews, Æneas and Robert, sons of the first Lord Reay. The former he took into his own regiment, in which, in a few years, he became lieutenant-colonel. The latter he sent to school at Utrecht for a short time, and afterwards obtained commissions for them in his own regiment. In the beginning of 1687, several British officers in the Dutch service were recalled to England by King James, and amongst others was Æneas Mackay, then a captain. On his arrival in London, the King made him some favourable propositions to enter his service, which he declined, and, in consequence, when he reached Scotland, he was ordered to be apprehended as a spy. He had been imprisoned nearly seven months in Edinburgh Castle, when the Prince of Orange landed at Torbay, and he was liberated upon granting his personal bond to appear before the privy council when called upon, under a penalty of £500 sterling. The Dutch Mackays married among the nobility of Holland, and one of the families of that branch held the title of baron.