

1467 MS: The Mathesons

As the Mathesons appear to have shared a common origin with the MacKenzies, it may be as well to begin this article by quoting from my conclusion about the latter. “If we accept our pedigree as historically correct in all its steps, we discover what its author probably wished us to think – that the MacKenzies, along with the Mathesons, were a junior branch of the Aird family who, perhaps at the time of the grant of the Aird to the Bissets *c.* 1190, were sent as pioneers into Kintail, one of the west-coast districts which the Norse settlers were beginning to abandon . . . If we prefer, like Aonghas MacCoinnich, to see the MacKenzies as strangers from the south or east, brought into Kintail (then regarded as part of northern Argyll) as bailies by the MacDonald lord of the Isles in the mid-fourteenth century, and deployed from *c.* 1372 in pursuit of the MacDonald claim to the earldom, we begin to perceive the advantages of claiming for them a spurious twelfth-century Aird connection . . .”¹

As is well known, the traditional homeland of the Mathesons (*Clann Mhic Mhathain*) is in Wester Ross, around Lochalsh, Lochcarron and Kintail. In the 1467 MS (part of National Library of Scotland Adv. MS 72.1.1) they occupy three lines, f. 1rd24–26, between the MacKenzies and the Nicolsons. This is geographically appropriate, given that for the half-century or so prior to 1400 the MacKenzies were their principal neighbours to the east, and the Nicolsons, who then gave way to the MacLeods, were their principal neighbours to the west.²

The main published sources of information on the Mathesons are of several kinds. First we had Alexander Mackenzie’s *History of the Mathesons, with Genealogies of the Various Branches* (Inverness, 1882). This reappeared as the much more substantial *History of the Mathesons with Genealogies of the Various Families* (Stirling, 1900), ‘edited, largely re-written, and added to by Alexander Macbain’. Then there is a series of papers published in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* by the late Rev. William Matheson: ‘Traditions of the MacKenzies’ in vol. 39/40 (1942–50), ‘Traditions of the Mathesons’ in vol. 42 (1953–59), and ‘Genealogies of the Mathesons’ in vol. 47 (1971–72). My historical interpretation of the Matheson pedigree in what follows is mainly based on the pioneering MacKenzie paper; this shows the extent to which the origins of the two clans appear to be mixed up with each other.

There is now, however, a third type of source, doctoral theses written in Gaelic by Aonghas MacCoinnich and in English by David Kyle Cochran-Yu. References to Mathesons in these are sparse but of great interest, so it may be helpful to cite here, in translation, what MacCoinnich has to say about their origins: “Although MacKenzie historians paint a picture . . . of a kindred opposed to the MacDonalds, this is pretty unreliable. They, and perhaps also the Mathesons, were allies of the MacDonalds while the latter were trying to obtain the earldom of Ross prior to *c.* 1400, or in actual possession of it subsequent to that date . . . It may have been from outside Ross-shire that the kindred (MacKenzies, perhaps also Mathesons)

had come at some point prior to *c.* 1400. Of the Gillanderses and Mathesons we know little, because . . . they had no land-holdings in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But at least one branch of the Mathesons appears on the border between Ross and Sutherland, having entered service as bailies to the earl of Sutherland at the end of the fifteenth century. There is nothing else to support this opinion, but if the MacDonalds had been placing their followers where they anticipated having to defend their Ross-shire boundaries, Lochalsh and the Sutherland border – the two districts where the Mathesons appeared – would be highly appropriate . . . Could the MacKenzies be the family that brought the MacDonalds into Ross (north Argyll) and defended MacDonald rights there? Could the same be said of the Mathesons and Gillanderses, who also appear in the 1467 MS?”³

I will now cite the Matheson pedigree as it stands in the three editions known to me: (1) W. F. Skene’s *Collectanea* of 1839, (2) his *Celtic Scotland* of 1880, and (3) the on-line version published by my wife Máire and myself in 2009. For ease of comparison, these texts are all presented here according to the three-line structure in which they appear in the manuscript.

(1) *Collectanea* 1839, with Skene’s note:

d24 *Genelach ic Matgamna anso sis .i.* Muireachach
d25 mc Doincaig ic Donch ic Donch ic Muireachach
d26 mc Cainig* ic Matgamna ic Cainig ic &c.

d24 THE GENEALOGY OF THE MATHISONS.—Murdoch
d25 son of Duncan son of Duncan son of Duncan son of Murdoch
d26 son of Keneth* son of Mathan son of Keneth &c.

* Kermac [Kenach] MacMaghan of the Earldom of Ross is mentioned in the public accounts of Lawrence le Grant, Sheriff of Inverness (then comprehending that Earldom) *cir.* 1263 in the reign of Alexander the third. The &ca. at the end of any genealogy, implies that its conclusion is to be sought for in that immediately preceding.⁴

(2) *Celtic Scotland*, with Skene’s notes:

d24 GENEALACH MHIC MATGAMNA* ANSO SIS Murechach
d25 mac Donncaig mhic Murechach mhic Donnchach mhic Murechach
d26 mhic Cainnig mhic Matgamna mhic Cainnig mhic Cristin

* From MS. 1467 and MacVurich.

d24 GENEALOGY OF THE MATHESONS DOWN HERE. Murdoch
d25 son of Duncan son of Murdoch son of Duncan son of Murdoch
d26 son of Kenneth* son of Matgamna (or Mahan) son of Kenneth son of Cristin.

* Kermac Macmaghan appears in the Exchequer Rolls in 1264.⁵

(3) www.1467manuscript.co.uk:

d24 gen[e]lach mhic mathghamhna annso sis .i. murchadh
d25 mac donnchaigh mhic murchaidh mhic donnchaidh mhic murchaidh moir
d26 mhic cainnigh mhic mathghamna mhic cainnigh mhic cristin

d24 The genealogy of Matheson here below, i.e. Murchadh
d25 son of Duncan son of Murchadh son of Duncan son of big/great Murchadh
d26 son of Kenneth son of Mathghamhain son of Kenneth son of Cristin.

One point arising from these should be clarified straight away. Skene's reference to 'MacVurich' in *Celtic Scotland* would lead us to understand that there is a Matheson pedigree in at least one of the two so-called Books of Clanranald (one of which was written mainly by Niall MacMhuirich, the other mainly by Christopher Beaton). There is not. What seems to have happened is that Skene found a 'correction' to the MacKenzie pedigree of 1467 in Beaton's work, the 'Black Book of Clanranald'. As the ascription to Beaton was not yet known in Skene's day, he thought of the 'Black Book' as MacMhuirich's, which was reasonable, as a lot of it was indeed copied from works by MacMhuirichs. Skene therefore footnoted his MacKenzie pedigree in *Celtic Scotland* as: "From MS. 1467 and MacVurich." Knowing that the Mathesons and MacKenzies were descended from a common ancestor, he then repeated the footnote for the Matheson pedigree, even though it was misleading. Skene was extremely proud of his pioneering work in collating the pedigrees of the Highland clans, and rightly so, but his genealogical appendix to *Celtic Scotland* has been a source of confusion ever since, leading to the fundamental question that the present series is trying to answer: "What exactly does the 1467 MS say?"

I now come to my usual line-by-line discussion of the 1467 text using pen-and-ink sketches, based on spectrally-imaged colour photographs which are superior to those in the website. As always, square brackets indicate illegible, indistinct or uncertain text, italics indicate expanded contractions (the less obvious ones, at least).

d24 

gen[e]lach mhic mathghamhna annso sis .i. murchadh = "The genealogy of Matheson here below, i.e. Murchadh"

This line and the next are perfectly clear. William Matheson points out that there are no contemporary references to Murchadh, but that we know the name and patronymic of the chief of the clan in 1428, when James I summoned the northern leaders to Inverness to answer for their conduct: Alexander 'Macmirkyn' or 'Mackmurkine', i.e. *Alastair mac Murchaidh*. This in turn has led to the identification of Alexander and his brother Roderick as prisoners of the earl of Mar in Inverness Castle in 1415 – probably in reprisal for supporting Donald of the Isles in 1411, the year of Harlaw. The father of these brothers, then, is our Murchadh.⁶

the MacIvers of Ross are a native Norse remnant from the western seaboard of the province, and that they adopted a fictional Argyllshire connection in later times as a way of seeking protection from Mac Cailein Mór.

Aonghas MacCoinnich is sceptical about the identification of ‘Kiarnakr son of Machamals’ and ‘Kermac Macmaghan’ with our *Cainneach mac Mathghamhna*. He points out that the name Cormac was not unknown in Ross-shire, at least in the sixteenth century, and cites examples from Lochbroom and Lewis; indeed it is worth pointing out that the Mathesons were probably descended from Cormac mac Airbheartaigh, see below. It is premature to dismiss Skene’s identification, however, until the Norse sources have been thoroughly re-examined. It is also worth bearing in mind that whereas the first certain appearance of a Cormac in Ross is in 1540, the first certain appearance of a Coinneach in Ross is in 1215.¹³

There may in any case be some common ground between the two scenarios, as the surname *MacMhathain* or *Mac Mathghamhna* is by no means unknown in south-west Scotland. In 1455 the ‘Makmaykanis’ were one of a number of client kindreds which were ordained to be under the captaincy of the Kennedies of Dunure in Carrick, then a thoroughly Gaelic-speaking region. This appears to have been in line with a formulary used in the king’s chapel in the previous century, according to which ‘we have constituted X captain (*capitaneus*) of all his kin (*parentela*) or, of a certain kin, of which by right and according to the customs of Galloway used hitherto he ought to be captain. Wherefore we command all others who are of the said kin that they submit to X their captain in everything just as it was done according to the said laws and customs of all his kin’.¹⁴ The ‘Makmaykanis’ are surely the *Clann Mhic Mathghamhna*, given that Bower refers to the chief of the Mathesons in Ross-shire as ‘Makmaken’.¹⁵ Thus we find Mathesons serving the Kennedies of Dunure in 1455 in a military role similar – perhaps identical – to that in which ‘Kermac Macmaghan’ served William earl of Ross in 1262. What is more, the attack on Skye went beyond mere local relevance. As David Cochran-Yu has expressed it: “Since Skye was part of the kingdom of Man, this meant the earl was attacking his probable nephew, Magnus Olafsson, with a possible link to his father’s previous involvement with Skye. If Farquhar had been promised control over Skye or Lewis in return for his support of Olaf, then William might have been trying to enforce an unfulfilled agreement.”¹⁶

The point is that Ross was very much an east-coast earldom, so the only way for the earl to attack Skye was to employ seaborne west-coast manpower. William Matheson assumed that in 1262 the Mathesons were already settled in the general area of Lochcarron, Lochalsh and Kintail, but it is more likely that they were a mobile mercenary force based much further south in Argyll, probably in the Firth of Clyde region. Among the witnesses to a transaction between two Kennedy families in Carrick in 1475 were William and Hector MacMahyn.¹⁷ It is at this point, then, that we enter the appalling tangle of Carrick and Galloway surnames (MacMeeken, MacMaykin, MacMicking, etc.) derived by G. F. Black from *MacMiadhachain*, and of Kintyre surnames (Mathieson, MacMath) derived by Angus Martin from *MacMath(a)* ‘Son of Matthew’.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that some of these, at least, are more likely to derive from *Mac Mathghamhna*. The precise relationship to the Irish

MacMahons (also *Clann Mhic Mathghamhna*) is unknown, but it is noticeable that no such relationship is claimed by the 1467 MS.

There can be no doubt about the last name in our pedigree: the stroke over *cr* gives us *crist* (a standard contraction), then the extension of the stroke over *i* gives us *in*. The Gillanders pedigree includes *cainneach mac cristin mhic eoghain mhic cainnigh mhic cristin mhic gille eoin na hairde*, which we may translate, adding implied flourits, as Kenneth *c.* 1190, son of Cristín *c.* 1160, son of Eoghan *c.* 1130, son of Kenneth *c.* 1100, son of Cristín *c.* 1070, son of Gilleoin of the Aird *c.* 1040.¹⁹ It is clear that our Kenneth son of Cristín corresponds to the first of these two Kenneths in the Gillanders pedigree. We may therefore add Eoghan *c.* 1130, Kenneth *c.* 1100, Cristín *c.* 1070 and Gilleoin of the Aird *c.* 1040 to the existing Matheson pedigree, so bringing it back to the alleged common ancestor of the Gillanderses, MacKenzies and Mathesons. Behind Gilleoin of the Aird the line of descent goes back to Cormac son of Airbheartach, demonstrating that the Mathesons were among the northern families who claimed to be of the Cenél Loairn of Dalriada. This was probably true, and suited Dubhghall Albanach and his master John of the Isles very well.

Conclusion

The Gillanders pedigree goes back from *c.* 1400 to Gilleoin of the Aird in thirteen steps. The Matheson pedigree as just described also goes back from *c.* 1400 to Gilleoin of the Aird in thirteen steps. The MacKenzie pedigree goes back from *c.* 1400 to Gilleoin of the Aird in only nine steps. This looks suspicious, and can only add to our general impression that the Aird connection was concocted *c.* 1400 by a MacDonald pedigree-maker in order to bolster the claim of the lord of the Isles to the earldom of Ross. In terms of the words with which this article began, it simply turns ‘a spurious twelfth-century Aird connection’ into ‘a spurious eleventh-century Aird connection’. The evidence adduced here is in line with that adduced in my MacKenzie article – that the Mathesons, like their alleged cousins the MacKenzies, were a minor client kindred of southern origin, probably from the greater Firth of Clyde area, who begin to appear in the north in 1262, the year before the battle of Largs, as part of a general effort to end Norse hegemony in the West Highlands and islands.²⁰

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NOTES

- 1 Ronald Black, ‘1467 MS: The MacKenzies’, *WHN&Q*, ser. 4, no. 8 (Nov. 2018), pp. 10–18: 16–17.
- 2 Ronald Black, ‘1467 MS: The Nicolson’s’, *WHN&Q*, ser. 4, no. 7 (July 2018), pp. 3–18.
- 3 Aonghas MacCoinnich, ‘Tùs gu Iarlachd: Eachdraidh Clann Choinnich c.1466–1638’ (PhD thesis, Univ. of Aberdeen, 1999), pp. 67–68, 108.
- 4 The Iona Club, *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis* (Edinburgh, 1839), pp. 54–55, 62.
- 5 William F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland* (3 vols, Edinburgh, 1876–80), vol. 3, pp. 485–86.
- 6 William Matheson, ‘Traditions of the MacKenzies’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society*

- of Inverness*, vol. 39/40 (1942–50), pp. 193–228: 197; David Kyle Cochran-Yu, ‘A Keystone of Contention: the Earldom of Ross, 1215–1517’ (PhD thesis, Univ. of Glasgow, 2015), pp. 130, 140.
- 7 For Mac Shealbhaich see Black, ‘1467 MS: The Nicolsons’, pp. 11–12.
 - 8 Matheson, ‘Traditions of the MacKenzies’, pp. 207, 209, 214.
 - 9 John Stuart and George Burnett, eds, *The Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1878), pp. 19–20; Sir G. W. Dasent, trl., *Icelandic Sagas*, vol. 4, *The Saga of Hacon, and a Fragment of the Saga of Magnus* (London, 1894), p. 340; Alan Orr Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1922), vol. 2, p. 605; Matheson, ‘Traditions of the MacKenzies’, pp. 196–97; David Sellar, ‘Highland Family Origins – Pedigree Making and Pedigree Faking’, in *The Middle Ages in the Highlands*, ed. by Loraine Maclean of Dochgarroch (Inverness Field Club, Inverness, 1981), pp. 103–16: 111; R. Andrew McDonald, ‘Old and New in the Far North: Ferchar Maccintsacairt and the Early Earls of Ross, c.1200–1274’, in *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland, c.1200–1500*, ed. by Steve Boardman and Alasdair Ross, pp. 23–45: 43; Cochran-Yu, ‘A Keystone of Contention’, pp. 46–47.
 - 10 Matheson, ‘Traditions of the MacKenzies’, p. 208.
 - 11 [Peter Colin Campbell], *Account of the Clan-Iver* (Aberdeen, 1873), pp. 7–9; Black, ‘1467 MS: The Nicolsons’, p. 11.
 - 12 Matheson, ‘Traditions of the MacKenzies’, p. 208.
 - 13 MacCoinnich, ‘Tùs gu Iarlachd’, pp. 19, 577; Black, ‘1467 MS: The MacKenzies’, p. 15.
 - 14 Hector L. MacQueen, ‘The Laws of Galloway: A Preliminary Study’, in *Galloway: Land and Lordship*, ed. by Richard D. Oram and Geoffrey P. Stell (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 131–43: 132.
 - 15 D. E. R. Watt, ed., *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower*, vol. 8 (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 260.
 - 16 Cochran-Yu, ‘A Keystone of Contention’, p. 47.
 - 17 National Archives of Scotland GD109/269; Dr D. C. McWhannell, ‘Gaill, Gàidheil, Gall-Ghàidheil and the Cenéla of Greater Galloway’, *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 3rd ser., vol. 87 (2013), pp. 81–115: 107.
 - 18 George F. Black, *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning, and History* (New York, 1946), p. 542; Angus Martin, *Kintyre Families* (Campbeltown, 2010), pp. 49, 59–60.
 - 19 Ronald Black, ‘1467 MS: The Gillanderses’, *WHN&Q*, ser. 4, no. 9 (Feb. 2019), pp. 3–15: 9–10.
 - 20 I have to thank Dr Aonghas MacCoinnich and Dr Donald McWhannell for their help in the preparation of this article. All surviving errors are mine.