

Foreword

Bill MacAskill (1930-2011)

On retirement from business in Scotland, Bill MacAskill wrote his *Short History of the MacAskills* in 1994 in an attempt to put his family line into perspective. He was born and brought up in the village of Inverkirkaig, near Lochinver in Sutherland, far removed from the hereditary homeland of the clan at Rubh' an Dùnain on the Isle of Skye.

His ancestors, two MacAskill brothers from Glenbrittle, had moved to Assynt in the mid-18th century and took on the leases of conjoined tacks, around 100 years before the Skye peninsula itself was abandoned following the Highland Clearances.

Bill and his wife Ishbel, the Gaelic singer, lived in Inverness. What follows is an abridged and edited version of his father's narrative, concentrating on the clan's early history and its association with Skye. It is reproduced with kind permission of his family.

Tacksman explained

(**Gaelic:** *fear-taic*, "supporting man")

A tacksman generally paid an annual rent for the land let to him (his "tack"), although his tenure could last for several generations. He would often be related to his landlord, the laird or free-holder, and might, for example, represent a sept of the clan chief's own family. The tacksman in turn would let out his land to sub-tenants. He might also keep some for himself.

The diarist Dr Samuel Johnson defined the class in this manner:

Next in dignity to the laird is the Tacksman; a large taker or lease-holder of land, of which he keeps part as a domain in his own hand, and lets part to under-tenants. The tacksman is necessarily a man capable of securing to the laird the whole rent, and is commonly a collateral relation. These tacks, or subordinate possessions, were long considered as hereditary, and the occupant was distinguished by the name of the place at which he resided. He held a middle station, by which the highest and the lowest orders were connected. He paid rent and reverence to the laird, and received them from the tenants. This tenure still subsists, with its original operation, but not with its primitive stability.

The three fundamental obligations traditionally imposed on tacksman were *grassum* (a premium payable on entering into a lease), rental (either in kind, or in money, which was designated "tack-duty"), and the rendering of military service.

These individuals therefore were therefore key in disseminating and upholding the laws of the clan chief, as well as operating as, in effect, the landlord's estate Factor or manager and as such could accrue significant wealth, influence and power.

**MacAskills of Rubh' an Dùnain Society,
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A Short History of the MacAskills

By Bill MacAskill

Introduction

The early history leading to the 'Rhundunan' (near Glen Brittle on Skye) connection is important as it provides an explanation for the financial resources which allowed the MacAskills who moved to Assynt in the early 1740s to attain the exalted social level of 'Tacksman'.

At the time, there would have been many other MacAskills in Skye, elsewhere in the Highlands and islands and in America, but few on this side of the Atlantic would have had access to the funds required to acquire a lease, purchase stock, build farmsteads, buy tools and equip households.

My research suggests John MacAskill of 'Rhundunan' was the likely paymaster in the case of the Assynt immigrants.

The tacksman was the next step down from the landlord. Historically he was a close relative of the clan chief, enjoying elevated status in his own community in return for administering clan laws, putting fighting men at the clan's disposal and assuming the role of officer-leader in battle.

By the 18th century these family connections still existed but rent had replaced warriors; farms were measured and let, and the most senior tacksman in an area acted as Factor to the landlord. I

Traditionally the tacksman let to sub-tenants to work areas of land for rent. They in turn would often sub-let and they also allowed cottars to live on the land free in return for labour. This latter class would have provided the astonishing number of servants in the houses of tacksmen and tenants.

Early History

The name MacAskill is undoubtedly of Norse origin, although its exact origins are difficult to establish. One tradition suggests Taegail (Thaegail, Taskail or Taskill was the early MacAskill male name and remained common as such down through the centuries) originally settled in Ireland before removing to Skye because of a feud. Ireland and Skye were then both part of the Norse Kingdom of Man and the tremendous amount of sea traffic and movement between areas of that Kingdom would have made this very possible.

In this strand of tradition it is suggested that the King of Man made the MacAskills the keepers of Dunscaith Castle in Sleat on Skye. A different strand suggests this position was conferred by the MacLeods.

However, as the then King of Man was Olaf the Black, father of Leod who was father of Torcuil and Tormod, the progenitors of the clan MacLeod, both strands have merit. Because the MacAskills were always the favoured followers of MacLeod chiefs, the MacLeod genealogy is as follows:

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Harold the Black of Yseland: Viking King of Man and the Isles. Yseland assumed to be Iceland but more likely to be Islay. Father to:

Olaf the Red: Reigned from 1103 to 1153. Father to:

Godred the Black: (aka, Godred Crovan) He of 'Birlinn' fame. Reigned from 1154 to 1187. Father to:

Olaf the Black: Also King of Man but probably lived in Lewis. Father to:

Leod (First Chief): Of mixed Norse and Celtic origin, he lived from c.1200 to 1280. He is buried in Iona in front of the High Altar. Father to:

Tormod, Torquil, John, Olaus and two daughters.

Tormod: His son Tormod is ancestor of MacLeod of Harris. Dunvegan and Glenelg.

Torquil: Ancestor of MacLeod of Lewis, Assynt, Coigach, Gairloch and Raasay.

John: Settled in Ireland **Claus:** Settled in Iceland.

Daughters: One married a mainland Ross, other's history unknown.

Early References

The MacAskill fortunes have been closely linked to the MacLeods of Dunvegan even before Norse rule ended in 1266. In MacLeod clan history they are first mentioned in the time of Malcolm, Chief, 1320-1370.

William MacAskill was the foster brother (*co-dhalta*) of the Chief and distinguished himself during the first Fraser raid c.1350. He was acting as *seneschal*, guardian of Dunvegan and with six brothers attacked the Frasers in a wood near Broadford as they were making their way home laden with spoil and routed them.

For generations the MacAskills were the lieutenants of MacLeod of Dunvegan on sea and land and commanded his *birlinn* or galleys. As wardens or coastline-watchers for the clan, one of them always accompanied the chief fully armed. As a reward for helping to capture and hold Dun Sgathaich or Dunscaith Castle in Sleat, from the Macdonalds, the Macleods granted the MacAskills occupation of the lands of Rudha nan Dunann. These they retained after the MacLeods lost Sleat. They are said to also have had lands in other parts of the MacLeod Estates.

As warriors, the reputation of the MacAskills was high. They distinguished themselves when the MacDonalds attacked the MacLeods in the time of William, 5th Chief (1392-1402), seizing the enemy galleys and cutting off their retreat.

At the second battle of Inverlochy, when Iain, 6th Chief of MacLeod was suffering a wound he received at the Battle of Harlaw, the combined forces of the Siol Tormod and the Siol Torquil were commanded by the Chief of Lewis but, under him a MacAskill led the men from Dunvegan.

In the fierce Battle of Glendale c.1490 when the MacDonalds again invaded MacLeod lands one of the MacAskills cut down one of the leaders of the MacDonalds and, raising his head on a spear, ordered the MacLeod pipers to play the MacDonald's lament which greatly disheartened his clansmen.

MacAskill was then attacked by the other MacDonald leader, Allan of Noidart in his desperate efforts to cut his way back to his galleys. In the fierce fight that followed MacAskill was killed along with three of his brothers.

In recognition of his services ever after this exploit, the MacAskills were granted the distinction of having a warrior specially carved on their tombs.

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More Peaceful Times

The change from fighting man to farmer during more peaceful times saw the MacAskills prosper. They were innovative and enterprising and were among the first of the tacksman class on Skye to export their cattle to the South.

By 1700 seven farms in Minginish in the west of Skye were held by members of the family. Rents were paid in cash and in kind. There were in addition church dues and land taxes to be paid. By 1724, *MacAskill of Rhu* paid £11 5s 4d in rent and dues and his kinsman and neighbour at Leasol in Glenbrittle paid £8 15s 10d.

In the mid-18th century, it became established practice for all farms to be let at a given date, and for a fixed period of years. When the estate was 'set' in this way in 1754 the farms at the Rhu and Leasol were merged together to form one large unit., the whole being designated 'Rhundunan'. And thus began a series of mergers which were to culminate 75 years later in south Minginish being organised as a single sheep farm.

The man who oversaw these changes at 'Rhundunan' was Kenneth MacAskill, eldest son of John MacAskill of Rhundunan. According to a contemporary account he was 'a rich man and ambitious with it'. He became a Justice of the Peace before he was 30 and then became embroiled in county politics over the right to vote. In 1795 he joined the The Royal Fencible Highland Regiment and served with them for five years in Ireland.

As Kenneth was John MacAskill's eldest son and would have automatically inherited Rhundunan it seems probable that the old man would have been able to fund the acquisition of 'Tacks' for other members of the family. We know for instance that, in 1746 and 1748 respectively, *Choinnich* MacAskill and *Thaisgail* MacAskill moved from Minginish in Skye to become tacksmen of the Island of Berneray in North Uist.

On returning to Skye from Ireland, Kenneth became captain of one of two companies raised in Bracadale for the purpose of home defence. In 1811 he organised and led an emigration of his own kinsmen and other small tenants to America returning to Scotland 10 years later.

Meanwhile, at Rhundunan, Kenneth continued what his father had begun. At the 'set' of 1792 he applied for and obtained an enlargement including Bolinture and part of Glenbrittle itself. And by the end of the century farm consisted of the peninsula, Leasol, Bolinture, a third of Glenbrittle and the Cuillin forest as far north as the Allt Dearg and as far east as Port Sgaille. It also included the island of Soay.

At that time the chief business of the famr was the rearing of black cattle. Beasts were sold at local fairs and taken south by drovers. The farm had horses and goats and also some native sheep. though no farm on Skye was laid out entirely as sheep pasture. Kelp manufacture was also underway with the best shores being at Scavaig and Soay. A survey gave the estimate at an annual yield of five and three-quarter tons.

Sheep farming came to Skye at the start of the 19th century and it was Kenneth MacAskill himself who introduced it. His new breeds were branded with an 'S' and known in the district as 'Rhundunan' sheep. As early as 1803 he was complaining to fellow farmers about the cost and delays in getting customs clearance for shipment of wool to Liverpool.

A few years later an agricultural survey reported: 'Sheep have lately been introduced as farm stock at Rhundunan, Gesto and Tallisker and they promise to do well. They are indeed the only proper stock for the Cuillen mountain districts. Both the tweedale and cheviot have been found to thrive.'

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The Changing Highland Economy

Sheep were to transform the economy of the Highland estates. The need for manpower was past and industry had found a cheaper alternative to kelp. The lairds soon realised that their extravagant lifestyles were better supported by the higher incomes from the animals rather than people.

Ancient loyalties and sacrifices conveniently forgotten, the 'Clearances were about to start in earnest. It is perhaps ironic that a MacAskill would introduce the animal that would create so hardships for his kinsmen.

At the 'set' of 1810, the MacLeod clan chief in Skye demanded a substantial increase in rents. This drew wide protest. These, however, were ignored and advertisements appeared in the newspapers offering extensive farms to let in Minginish. Entry was to be at Whitsunday 1811. The announcement stated: '... a survey and measurement of land is now making out. Seasoned offers will be received.' Similar advertisements were being placed by the notorious Patrick Sellar seeking tenants for the 'cleared' lands of Assynt.

The Skye survey was carried out by Charles Stewart and covered the whole of Minginish. Rhundunan farm was measured as 442 acres of arable and 26,835 acres of pasture. In the new lease the foxhunter's salary was to be paid by the farmer, one good farmhouse had to be left at the termination of the let, and kelp rights were to be retained by the landlord. The rent demanded was £700 a year, the highest on the whole estate.

Captain Kenneth, as he was by now known, accepted these terms for 'Rhundunan, Glenbrittle and Soay Island as delineated on Mr. Stewart's Plan' but within a fortnight he wrote to MacLeod confessing he had only signed the new lease in order to give himself time to look through the world to find a spot to rest upon. Emigration was not to be considered lightly at his time of life. If the rent could be reduced somewhat he still hoped to be able to end his days in the glens of Brittle rather than on the banks of the Ohio.

Tacksman-led Emigration

Displaying a shrewd vision of the future, Kenneth MacAskill kept the Rhundunan farm at the new rent, chartered a ship and set sail for America with a large party of his own tenants. The ship sailed in 1811 and, running the blockade of American ports, docked safely in Wilmington. (American ports were under blockade at this time as a prelude to the 1812 war.) Some of the party stayed in North Carolina, others went to South Carolina where they joined MacAskill kinsmen who had immigrated to America before independence.

Many years later Kenneth MacAskill was to be accused of taking these people away against their will and under false pretences. John MacKenzie, factor of the estate, was asked for his version of the story. He replied, "I believe they went of their own accord. It may or may not have been the case. I cannot say. The tenant of the farm went to America and brought them to his own land there, and remained with them for two years, and then left them, as we are given to understand, in good circumstances".

What can be said about this emigration to America is that it was not an isolated instance. It was a period when tacksmen of considerable means were investing in land in the Carolinas and chartering sound vessels with reliable crews to take willing migrants to America.

So popular became this form of managed passage to the new world, that lairds and landlords, passed an Act of Parliament seeking to halt tacksman-led emigration and its resultant loss of rental income. However, when economic value of sheep over people became apparent, they had the law repealed and eviction and forced emigration began in earnest.

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Deprivation-driven Emigration

It was from this point that the appalling misery of The Clearances really began. Leaking hulks held together with chains around the hull transported logs from America's eastern seaboard to Britain. Ill-fed, poorly-clad emigrants, the victims of brutal evictions in the Highlands and islands were cargoes on the return trip to America in the holds of these unaltered, damp dark vessels. The enabling tacksman structure that had paid for reasonable ships had been destroyed, logs were the paying cargo, impoverished people only a return load. Apart from the many ships that foundered and were lost at sea, hundreds died on these terrible passages.

John MacLeod of Woodstock, Ontario and originally from Bernera, Uist, now in his 97th year, recalls working his first prairie harvest as a young man in a Gaelic-speaking community of settlers. An old man, 'almost as old as I am now' told him of his awful childhood memories of crossing the Atlantic with his parents from Mull. He was haunted by the memory of the daily throwing of bodies over the side.

There is no doubt, the earlier emigrants who went under the guidance of Kenneth MacAskill and other tacksman like him were fortunate by comparison. When Captain Kenneth returned home from the Carolinas he joined the Highland Agricultural Society and won prizes for his brood mares.

In 1821 he came to an agreement with MacLeod for a further enlargement of his farm, effectively from Whitsunday 1825. Under the agreement the neighbouring farms of Crakinish, Braeynort, Carbost, Trien and Sataran were to be incorporated into Rhundunan. The rent was fixed at £1,260 a year and this was calculated on the basis of sales at the recently established Inverness Sheep and Wool Market.

'Old Rubha', as Kenneth was known late in life, died on March 1, 1841. He was 85. In his will he left some property in America but his wealth in Scotland was wholly bound up in his farm. His estate was worth just over £5,000 of which furniture and plate accounted for £82, farm implements £15, crops £24, horses £38, cattle £302 and sheep £4,614.

The end of 'Rhundunan'

Kenneth was succeeded by his son Donald. He had run the farm jointly with his father since 1831 but in 1847 he emigrated to New Zealand. He bought some land from the Maoris in the district of Thames on North Island which he farmed with his youngest brother.

Donald's successor at Rhundunan was Hugh MacAskill who belonged to a different branch of the family. He was brought up on the Island of Eigg and attended Glasgow University. In 1825 Hugh took a lease on the farm of Talisker in north Minginish and became one of the leading men of the Skye of his day. He founded the Talisker Distillery and for a while served as factor of the MacLeod estate.

In 1850 Hugh left Talisker and went to live in Glenbrittle where his household consisted of a great many nieces and nephews, 1 governess, 2 cooks, 1 chambermaid, 1 pantry maid, 1 tablemaid, 1 dairy maid, 1 gardener and the farm overseer. The Rhundunan farm at this time extended to 37,500 acres and employed 70 men. The rent was £12,000 a year.

Three years after his move to Glenbrittle Hugh surrendered the northern or Glenbrittle division of the farm to Donald C. Cameron from Argyllshire. He retained the southern or 'Rhundunan' division. Some years later there were further boundary changes in Cameron's favour so that towards the end of his life Hugh was farming only 5,500 acres and employing just 4 shepherds and 6 labourers.

Hugh MacAskill died in 1863 and he was the last of the MacAskills 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 MacAskill in the business and social life of Skye and the respect and affection entertained for him and his wife.'

On Hugh's death both divisions of the farm were taken by Donald Cameron who was to hold the tenancy for a further 20 years. The name 'Rhundunan' lingered on for many years but, with the link with the MacAskills now gone, the name 'Glenbrittle' came to be preferred as the title to the farm.

More on the Skye MacAskills

These excerpts, by kind permission, are from [History of Skye](#) by Alexander Nicolson (MacLean Press, December 1995). First edition 1930.

The MacAskills are one of the oldest families in Skye. They are traditionally said to be of Irish extraction, the account being that an ancestor, who had been embroiled in dissensions in Ireland over the succession to the throne, was forced to leave that country and seek the protection of MacLeod of Harris, who gave him lands in Skye. The root, '*Asketill*', however, points to a Norse origin for this clan, the word meaning 'sacrificial vessel of the gods.'

From the very early days this sept occupied the district of *Rubha an Dunain*, where the ruins of the family residence may still be seen. Before the MacDonalds took possession of *Dun Sgathaich*, it is said to have been held by the MacAskills as wardens of that fort under the Norse kings of Man. In after days, when reiving prevailed, they filled the office of *comes litoris*, or coast-watcher, to the MacLeods and one of them always did duty as commodore on board the principal galley of the chief of that clan.

In 1395 an incident occurred in which William Cleireach, Fifth Chief of MacLeod, was destined to further enhance his own fame and the fame of his clan. At that time a powerful personality was dominating the north and the west, where he was endeavouring to establish a Celtic dynasty. This was Donald, the son of John, Lord of the Isles, and Margaret Stewart, the daughter of Robert II. In order to placate his older half-brothers, whose power and possessions he had usurped, Donald conspired, among other designs to wrench his lands in Skye from the chief of the MacLeods and to confer them on one of his own brothers. At that time the Island of Skye formed part of the earldom of Ross and Donald could now assert his claims with greater confidence, in that he had become affianced to Lady Mary Lesley, who was Countess of Ross in her own right.

But the chief of MacLeod was not the man to surrender tamely to a usurping lord and he determined to resist this attempt at dispossession by every means in his power. Meanwhile, Donald dispatched a strong force under his brother -- the redoubtable Alasdair Carrach, to invade Skye. Having evaded the vigilance of MacAskill of Rubh an Dunain, constable of Dun Sgathaich and hereditary coast-watcher of the MacLeods, the invaders effected a landing at Eynort in Minginish. Thence they rapidly made for the east, by Carbost and Drynoch, leaving a wide trail of devastation behind them.

Their progress was soon, however, to suffer an abrupt set-back, for, at the head of Loch Sligachan, they were encountered by a powerful body of the MacLeods. Here a furious battle was waged and the natives acquitted themselves with such bravery and skill, that their opponents were thrown into hopeless confusion which soon developed into a rout. The pursuit was ruthlessly maintained by the stout-hearted islanders all the way back to the shores of Loch Eynort where a cruel fate awaited the panic-stricken fugitives.

On their arrival there, they discovered that their galleys had been taken possession of by the MacAskills, who had them moored some distance out to sea. Seeing that escape was now impossible they fled hither and thither in utter despair, only to be cut to pieces by their relentless foes. It is said that not a soul of them escaped that day of carnage and, according to the *MS, History of the MacLeods of Dunvegan*, the heads of the slain were collected, numbered, and dispatched as trophies to be retained in the custody of the warder of Dunvegan castle.

The MacAskills of *Rubh an Dunain* and their offshoot occupy a position of high distinction in the military history of Skye. Mention is often made about the exploits of a member of this famous family, one William MacAskill, who played such a prominent role in the discomfiture of the forces of the Lord of the Isles at the Battle of Sligachan, early in the sixteenth century. Tradition credits the clan with men of phenomenal physique and extraordinary strength.

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Many members of the family served the country, both in the Army and the Navy, and several are known to fame. Two brothers were officers in the American War of Independence: Captain John, who was tacksman of Rubha, and a younger brother, William, who afterwards rose to the rank of major-general and acted for a time as Governor of Mauritius. He died in 1815.

Another clansman who had a distinguished military career was Major-General Sir John MacAskill. He entered the service of the East India Company and took part in the fighting in India in the early years of the 18th century. After the massacre of General Elphinstone and his army by hostile Afghan tribes in 1841 and when Sir Robert Sale was dangerously beleaguered in Jellalabad, General MacAskill, as second in command to General Pollock, led the relieving army and tendered distinguished service in that brilliant piece of campaigning. He was serving under Sir Hugh Gough when the Sikhs broke out in rebellion in 1845 and in a minor engagement he was mortally wounded as he was leading his men to the charge. Three of his sons attained commissioned rank, serving chiefly in India (MacInnes, J, 1899, *The Brave Sons of Skye*, p. 160).

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