

# MACASKILL OF RUDH AN DUNAIN

## Part II. Tacksmen



### Introduction

*Part I took the story of the MacAskills up to the end of the sixteenth century and the statutes of Icomckill (Iona), imposed on the Island Chiefs by James the Sixth.*

The King's intention had been to curb their independence and stop the frequent clan wars that broke out over issues of land, dignity and influence. One of the immediate effects was to change the status of the heads of the families that made up a clan, the chieftains, who had held their estates from the chief in return for service, and 'Bannacht' and 'Coshering' - free lodging and subsistence for the chief and his large retinue (possibly up to 600), whilst they progressed around the clan lands. In future the chieftains would have to pay rent, though some of this continued to be in kind, and with this came rental agreements for fixed terms. These were usually, in the 17th century, for the life of the tenant plus a given period for his heir, perhaps 21 years. The lease was called a tack and holder a tacksman. The gentleman-warrior now became a farmer. Each tack was, in essence a large farm

based upon a township of ten to twenty households. Rudh an Dunain was one such and there were three neighbouring tacks in the area, Leasol at the head of Loch Brittle on the Cuillin shore, Bual an Tur on the opposite shore and Achakand (later known as Glen Brittle) at the head of the Glen. All these were to be incorporated into Rudh at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries.

### THE PEOPLE OF RUDH AN DUNAIN

*For the people of Rudh an Dunain life must have continued in much the same fashion from the coming of the MacAskills in about 1170 until the final disintegration of the clan system in the second half of the 18th century.*

The township consisted of a large farmhouse surrounded by a number of thatched cottages. Another group of cottages clustered together on the other side of the small glen and more dotted the shores of the loch. The house had one gabled end with a chimney and one rounded end. The roof, constructed of thatch on half truck rafters, was sufficiently steeply pitched to allow for a garret with a fireplace and small window in the gable end. Many of

the cottages, or "blackhouses" also had one square gabled end suggesting that they too had fireplace and chimney. In this they would have been of advanced design.

Chimneys in general did not make an appearance until the 16th century, and in Hebridean cottages not until the early 19th. Most "blackhouses" were so called for the soot that was deposited everywhere by the smoke drifting up from the open peat fire in the centre of the living room floor to an offset hole in the thatched roof. The living room, with its packed earthen floor, comprised only half the cottage space. The other half was a byre for cattle which also contained the door. Any smell from the occupants of the byre was countered by the smell of the smouldering peat fire, lit once a year in May from a faggot, itself lit at a township firelighting ceremony.

Most people worked for the tacksman, MacAskill of Rudh an Dunain, reputedly the descendant of an unbroken line from the Norseman Askell who came to Skye in the 12th century. They worked in return for the right to graze a few animals or cultivate a small strip of the township land. At some period they were also paid wages. These were laid down in

1788 at £2 per annum for able bodied men and £1 for others including striplings. All also received four pairs of shoes. Good dairywomen were worth fifteen shillings and three pairs of shoes, whilst women servants earned eight shillings and two pairs. Only about one acre in sixty of the land at Rubh was suitable for cultivation and this was dotted all over the place. (Clearly still identifiable from aerial photographs). Every available nook and cranny was put into use and this was manured with either seaweed or the old soot-infused thatch from the blackhouses. Very primitive farm implements were used and much of the turning of the soil was done with a foot plough, or Cas Chrom, still in use in the early nineteenth century. A mix of animals was kept, black cattle, small sheep, goats and horses, though in later years cattle and then sheep came to predominate. In general it was the men and the boys who tended the herd and the women the cultivation. Control of the cattle was vital if they were to be kept off the scattered crops, within the estate and out of danger. The upkeep of the dykes, mostly dry-stone walls, was important and laid down in law. Heavy penalties existed for strays and also for keeping animals in the habit of goring others with their lethal horns. In the summer the young men and girls took the herds to the higher pastures. Here they lived in "sheilings", temporary turf and wooden huts.

The people were hardy and, though there is controversy as to the general wear, most clothing was probably based, until the

mid 18th century, on some form of plaid, or blanket, wrapped about the body and belted at the waist. Clan tartans were a product of the Victorian age though most districts probably had a set template for weaving their cloth and this would have produced some local similarity of colour and pattern. Women and children seldom wore shoes and young unmarried girls were distinguished by a "snood", a form of hairnet and ribbon worn around the forehead. Gentlemen were much grander. Before the 15th or 16th centuries MacAskill might have worn a flowing saffron-coloured tunic and after that he had a number of choices: the belted plaid wound about the body and slung over the arm or fastened at the shoulder with a great brooch, with hose to the calf; or perhaps tight tartan trews cut on the cross with or without a plaid. He might wear a linen shirt and tartan jacket again cut on the cross or he might have preferred the lowland breeches and coat. Headgear for all men was the bonnet.

Rudh an Dunain was remote and the people would have had to produce their own pastimes. Much would have revolved around the ceilidh house where they would meet in the evenings, especially on dark winter nights and here they were regaled by the senachies with tales of ancient heroes, Cu Chullain and Scathaich, Finn and the Fion, and their own ancestors, Donald Dubh and others. The only time that most would enter a church would be at the rites of passage, churching a new-born child and mother, getting married or being buried. The local chapel was away over on the far shore of Loch Eynort and the top section of its graveyard was reserved for MacAskills. A visit on these occasions was a memorable event involving the whole township in up to a week long celebration. Hospitality was important. No door was ever closed to the visitor. If privacy was desired a wand was placed across the entrance as a sign.

#### TACKSMEN

*The Clan MacAskill held much of the south-west coast of Minginish with tacksmen at Kraikinish, Leasol, Achakand and Bualan Tur as well as Rudh and, until the early 17th century, Talisker.*

The MacAskills of Talisker were moved by Sir Rory Mor MacLeod of Dunvegan to Glendale to free a good estate for his son but they did not prosper there. Another MacAskill tacksman lived at Eboist and was the subject of a well known tale. He was killed in a drunken brawl by his neighbour and brother-in-law, John MacLeod of Gesto, who had visited him to congratulate him on the birth of a son. MacLeod, fearing revenge from the MacAskills sought help from his father-in-law Donald MacDonald of Cuidreach, a big man and famous as one of the victors of the battle at

Corrie-na-Criech and reputed ancestor of the MacDonalds of Kingsburgh. It is said that at sight of the old warrior on guard, with his great two-handed sword, outside Gesto's house put any thought of revenge on the part of the MacAskills out of their minds.

One advantage derived from the system of tacks is that the rental agreements help the genealogist to build family trees. After 1600 it becomes possible to establish a more accurate line for the family at Rudh. Thus we know that John MacAskill was tacksman in 1640, his son Kenneth in 1664, and his son, John Dubh in 1683. The latter married Catherine MacLeod of Drynoch and had two sons. The younger son married Janet MacLeod of Bay and started the line of the MacAskills of Bay, whilst the eldest, Ian Mor took over Rudh and married Janet Bethune of Skeabost, again with two sons. The younger of these was the progenitor of the MacAskills of Eigg. There is a story in the Morrison MSS about the eldest, Ian Og (like most MacAskills a big man) who was born in 1721. It relates that he married the daughter of the tacksman of Scalpay an Traigh, (on his gravestone his wife is recorded as Catherine MacLeod) a very beautiful lady with many suitors:-

*"Among them was one gentleman called Archibald MacDonald of Barrisdale. Mr MacAskill lived at Scalpay with his lady. But within a few days, he received a challenge from the aforesaid Archibald MacDonald. Mr MacAskill replied to this hostile letter, agreeing to the time and place of meeting as requested by MacDonald. It is said that MacAskill was skilled with the sword and also a man of great strength of body.*

MacDonald, by way of precaution, brought 12 stout men with him, whom he laid in ambush near the meeting place. The two duellists began to fight, both of them stout and clever. They both exhibited great strength and skill for about half an hour, when MacAskill began to gain ground so rapidly, that MacDonald was considered by the seconds to be in imminent danger. But at this critical moment, MacAskill's sword broke and MacDonald, seeing this disadvantage, and contrary to the rules of honourable duellists, aimed a deadly blow at MacAskill's head. MacAskill had only a piece of his sword left, with which he attempted to receive his enemy's stroke; his hand was wounded so severely that those men who had been until now lying in ambush stood up and a certain gentleman among them cried out- "MacDonald! Do not kill MacAskill. You naughty coward, you were going to kill MacAskill when he could not defend himself. You are a very lucky man, though a coward, that MacAskill's sword broke since you were no match for such a well bred gentlemen."



Old Rudh

Mr MacDonald then said that all that this gentleman had said was true, as far as it concerned himself."

Morrison goes on to relate how this MacAskill took over the tack at Rudh and Archibald MacDonald, several years later, became a follower of Prince Charles. He does not mention that Ian Og joined the MacLeod companies that fought on the Hanoverian side. His eldest son Kenneth, who was born in 1756, featured prominently in the life of Skye from 1775 when his father died until his own death in 1841. Kenneth's son, Donald emigrated to New Zealand in 1847 and Rudh passed to his cousin, Hugh MacAskill of the family of Eigg. Hugh died in 1863 without any sons, the last MacAskill at Rudh an Dunain.

#### MACASKILL SOLDIERS

*Although the Statutes of Icolmkill effectively ended the interclan wars in the Isles the Clan MacLeod did not escape involvement in the civil wars of the 17th and 18th centuries and many saw action during the wars with France and the United States.*

The Clan marched south with Charles II to the Battle of Worcester in 1646 and were decimated. Sorry treatment by the Stuart Kings disillusioned the Skye chiefs and they refused to support Prince Charles in 1745. Indeed MacLeod went so far as to raise four companies to fight on the government side. One of these companies was commanded by MacLeod of Talisker



Worcester - 1646



MacDonald - "Do not kill MacAskill"

and Ian Og, of duelling fame, was his ensign - one of eleven MacAskills. This force joined Lord Loudon in the defence of the North Highlands against the Jacobites. They fought rather half-heartedly at the battle of Inverurie and were present at the fiasco at Moy where they lost their piper, Donald MacCrimmon. Thereafter the Jacobites pushed Lord Loudon's forces back to Skye and turned to meet the Duke of Cumberland's army at Culloden. After Culloden the MacLeod companies were deployed under the command of Talisker, two in South Uist and one, Talisker's own, in Skye attempting the capture of Prince Charles. The day after the Prince and Flora MacDonald left Benbecula William Tolmie at Dunvegan wrote to MacLeod of MacLeod that his latest information (undoubtedly inaccurate):-

*"was that the Young Gentleman went from South Uist upon Tuesday last (24th June) for the mainland in an Eight Oared Boat and upon the Wednesday was Endeavouring in to Ruin-dunan. But a crowd of people from the land frightened them from landing in there place, so went off but God knows where."* (original spelling)

Ian Og MacAskill was stationed in South Uist at that time as Ensign in Norman MacLeod of Berneray's company. Flora and the Prince eventually landed near Monkstadt House and it is ironic that one of Talisker's lieutenants was at dinner there whilst Flora was seeking help from Lady MacDonald.

Both Ian Og's sons, Kenneth and William, became soldiers; Kenneth served in the fencibles and militia and William the regular army. The latter saw action in America, achieved the rank of Major-General, acted as Governor of Mauritius for a period and died in the West Indies.

Kenneth commanded the Skye company in the Duke of York's Fencible Highland Regiment, one of twenty-seven such regiments raised in the Highlands between 1797 and 1802. Kenneth's regiment was stationed in Ireland, at Kilkenny during the great uprising of 1798 and then at Balinglas, chasing rebels in the mountains. He was described as a brave and capable officer:-

*"On one occasion during an action with the rebels, a spent bullet struck him on the forehead, knocking his headpiece round, back-to-front. He coolly replaced it, and noticing that the incident had caused some merriment among his men, he said to them, "Come on quickly, lads; this is no place for loiterers or fools."*

*"One night after retiring to rest, he was heard roaring "that the devil was under the bed!" His men came and found a rebel concealed below the bed where he had been busy prodding the gallant captain with his bayonet. The culprit was hauled out, and immediately hunged to a cart. "Old Rudh" would face any foe in the field; but of the "powers of darkness" he had (like many highlanders) a wholesome dread."*

Later Kenneth commanded the Bracadale company of the 12th (Isle of Skye) battalion of the Inverness Volunteers, a militia unit. His cousin John, son of Dr John MacAskill, tacksman at Struan, saw action at Puerto Rico and in India during the Mahratta wars. He reached the rank of Major General and commanded the infantry division that forced the Khyber Pass in the 1842 war with Afghanistan. After several more successful actions on the North-West Frontier he was knighted, but was killed leading his division at the Battle of Moodkee in 1845.

## HARD TIMES

*Soldiering helped to reduce the problems of over-population in the 17th and 18th centuries, and this could have been the reason for Kenneth taking a company, mostly of his own people, to Ireland. After Waterloo the numbers needed for the armed forces declined and this safety-valve disappeared.*

The Island had also during this period found a good income from black cattle driven south to the markets at Crieff and Kirkcaldy and latterly from the export of kelp, seaweed burnt for potash used for the manufacture of, among other things, glass and soap. With the end of the war with Napoleon the markets for both these collapsed. In past ages the clan system had helped the people to weather hard times. After 1745 a government determined to destroy the system had introduced measures to weaken clan loyalties. Highland dress was proscribed and the chief's local jurisdiction abolished. To make matters worse there had been a number of fierce winters bringing famine. The century following the '45 was to see drastic changes at Rudh an Dunain and to the whole of Skye.

1771 and 1772 were particularly bad years and MacLeod received a letter from the tacksman at Ullinish:-

*"Things are awful, cattle are dying by thousands; poor are living on carcasses; no bread; no seed to sow."*

Over in Trotternish Dr Johnson had visited Allan and Flora MacDonald (of Prince Charles fame) and been well entertained. A year later they had emigrated to North Carolina. So desperate were the people that the MacDonald tacksmen had united to purchase 100,000 acres of that state and emigrant ships became a common sight in the harbours of Skye. The situation was exacerbated in 1810 when MacLeod employed a Mr Robert Brown to assess the rents of his tenants. Brown, a Fifeshire man, had been employed on this task around the Highlands and his reputation was notorious. He proposed a three fold increase. This was too much for Kenneth MacAskill and he decided to take a large proportion of his people and settle in Carolina, though he retained the land at Rudh and left a manager in charge. Their ship left Loch Bracadale in 1811.

In an effort to replace the loss of income from cattle Kenneth had increased the numbers of sheep on his land. Sheep need space to graze and fewer people to tend them. During his time the tacks of Glen Brittle and Leasol had been joined to Rudh and later Carbost, Trian and Sataran and he found himself with a growing population with ever decreasing resources for them. His first attempt at a solution was to build a new township on the island of Soay previously inhabited only by

shepherds. Presumably he hoped that the new islanders would find a good living by harvesting the large stocks of fish in Loch Seavaig.

Carolina was Kenneth's next hope. There he settled his people and stayed with them for ten years. During this time he married Christiana MacLeod of Leasol and had six sons and a daughter. In 1821 they returned to Rudh an Dunain and the children were educated in Edinburgh. Donald, the eldest became Kenneth's assistant in 1831 and the rest emigrated to Canada and New Zealand. After his death in 1841 Donald struggled to make the farm pay, but in 1847 he gave up and joined his brother Allan in New Zealand.

Kenneth's cousin Donald had become Doctor of the Small Isles but was drowned in 1817. His eldest son Hugh, was left with the responsibility of a large family and took over the tack of Bualan Tur, next to Rudh. In 1825 he became tenant of Talisker and, in 1830 founded the distillery at Carbost with his brother Kenneth. In 1847, he took over Rudh giving up Talisker in 1850 when the lease ran out. The old farmhouse at Rudh was a ruin and the family now lived at Leasol renamed Ruadh an Dunain. Today it is Glen Brittle House. This was at the start of the terrible potato famine 1847 to 1851. Hugh was responsible for the distribution of relief in his part of Minginish and spent a considerable amount of his own money in the process.

The Napier Commission was set up

to investigate the grievances of the crofters and much criticism was directed at the tacksmen of the preceding century. They were accused of hard-hearted financial exploitation forcing the people into poverty and emigration. However, it is difficult to see what other courses Kenneth, Donald and Hugh could have taken, given the situation of the times. Population was growing rapidly and doubled between 1810 and 1830. The old markets had gone and rents increased enormously. That the tacksmen still considered themselves responsible for their people is evident in Kenneth's efforts to resettle a large number in Carolina. Their own children had to emigrate and none of them could have been accused of becoming rich out of the proceeds of their farms. Hugh had money, but this was a legacy from his uncle, an East India Company ship captain. Kenneth's wealth was almost entirely bound up in farm stock. None were alive to refute the allegations set before Lord Napier, and their descendants were overseas.

Kenneth's children all emigrated, Donald and Allan to New Zealand, and William, young Kenneth and Jane to Canada. William founded a township and built mills at Cannington near Lake Simcoe in Ontario. He married Flora MacLean and had seven daughters with many descendants. One of these married an officer in the Gordon Highlanders, the father of the author of this article.

*Alisdair Murray.*



*A spent bullet knocked his headpiece back to front. He coolly replaced it.*