10

Achilles' Heel? The Earldom of Ross, the Lordship of the Isles, and the Stewart Kings, 1449–1507

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Early in May 1449 Alexander MacDonald, earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles, in Hugh Macdonald's famous phrase 'a man born to much trouble all his lifetime', died at Dingwall and was buried in the Chanonry of Ross (Rosemarkie).[1] His son and heir John, the eldest of a sizeable progeny, succeeded at the tender age of fifteen, without any apparent difficulty, to Alexander's vast inheritance – the Northern and Southern Hebrides, the lordships and lands of Lochaber, Garmoran, Kincardine in the Mearns, Kingedward in Buchan, and Greenan in Ayrshire, Knapdale and the peninsula of Kintyre in the south-west.[2] Of this huge empire, some of the lands – Kincardine, Kingedward, and Greenan – remained in ward until John's majority, probably in late 1455, by which time he had also been formally recognised as keeper of Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness. John was sheriff of Inverness by 1458, had the sheriffship of Nairn in his gift by the 1460s, and – above all – succeeded at once to his father's earldom of Ross, being present at a meeting of the council of the earldom at Dingwall as early as May 1450.[3] If John's father Alexander had been, in Sandy Grant's words, 'easily the greatest magnate in the entire Highlands', John himself, as a youth of fifteen in 1449, seemed to have even greater potential; for in that summer he married Elizabeth Livingstone, daughter of James Livingstone of Callendar, the royal chamberlain, keeper of Stirling Castle, and – most important of all – custodian of the person of the young king, James II.[4]

1 *Highland Papers*, i, 47.

2 *ALI*, introduction and no. 51. In much of what follows, my indebtedness to the editors of this splendid volume, the scholar's 'bible' for the history of the Lordship, will be readily apparent.

3 Ibid., 80–2.

4 A. Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland 1306–1469* (London 1984), 218; R. Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh 1974), 350; National Library of Scotland, MS. Acc. 4233 (the 'Auchinleck Chronicle'), fos. 122r–v; C. McGladdery, *James II* (Edinburgh 1990), 50, 53, 172.

Yet John MacDonald would lose it all – the earldom of Ross, the Lordship, his influence both with the king and with his kin and allies in the north and west – within his own lifetime, and would end his days as a pathetic pensioner of the Crown. If the Sleat *seanchaidh*, Hugh Macdonald, is to be believed, in the late 1470s John MacDonald's position was challenged by his son Angus, who drove him from his manor house on Islay and forced him to shelter for the night under an upturned boat, from which John emerged in the morning to lay a curse upon his son.[5] The curse would be fulfilled, and would indeed fall upon other members of the MacDonald kin apart from Angus himself, though not, perhaps, in the manner anticipated by John MacDonald. In any event, such a spectacular decline and fall requires explanation, and what follows is an attempt to provide some answers.[6]

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First, there is the question of young John MacDonald's inheritance in 1449. In theory, his lands and offices made him potentially the most powerful magnate north of the Forth; but as Grant has convincingly shown, John also inherited more than two generations of Crown–MacDonald hostility, based largely on the policy of expansion eastwards into Ross and the Moray coastal plain of the fourth Lord's two predecessors.[7] Thus although Alexander, John's father, ended his life as earl of Ross and royal justiciar north of the Forth, his relationship with the Crown had been stormy for most of his life; and reluctant royal recognition of Alexander as earl of Ross had come possibly a year before, but only openly after, James I's assassination in February 1437, when Stewart government was plunged into a period of weakness and civil war in the south, and there was no option but to accept the gains made by the third Lord in the north.[8] It may well be asked how safe these gains would remain once an adult Stewart king, in the person of James II, began to rule for himself. Certainly the omens were not good. Between 1428 and 1431, James I, that consummate master of the pre-emptive strike, had sought to

5 *Highland Papers*, i, 47–8.

6 There has been an abundance of scholarly work on the Lordship in recent years. Apart from the superb volume of the *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*, the following are of major importance: Grant, *Independence and Nationhood*, ch. 8; A. Grant, 'Scotland's "Celtic fringe" in the late Middle Ages: the Macdonald Lords of the Isles and the kingdom of Scotland', in R. R. Davies (ed.), *The British Isles 1100–1500: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections* (Edinburgh 1988), 118–41; J. W. M. Bannerman, 'The Lordship of the Isles', in J. M. Brown (ed.), *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century* (London 1977), 209–40; D. H. Caldwell and G. Ewart, 'Finlaggan and the Lordship of the Isles: an archaeological approach', *SHR* lxxii (1993), 146–66; Nicholson, *Later Middle Ages*, chs. 6–18 *passim*.

7 Grant, *Independence and Nationhood*, 215–18.

8 M. Brown, *James I* (Edinburgh 1994), 160.

acquire direct control of Ross by a policy of arrests and executions, and ultimately by invasions of Kintyre, Knapdale, Lochaber and Sutherland, undertaken either by himself or his lieutenants, of whom by far the most influential, until his death in 1435, was Alexander Stewart, earl of Mar. Although King James had some initial success, his Highland policy, as Michael Brown has recently shown, was misconceived; and royal strong-arm tactics simply provoked a powerful reaction in the west and north in support of the MacDonalds. This was a dangerous time for James I. Until October 1430 he had no male heir; and when he released Alexander MacDonald from imprisonment in Tantallon Castle, the third Lord not only responded by burning Inverness but by allying with his kinsmen, Alastair *Carrach* of Lochaber and Donald *Balloch*, the young and aggressive son of John *Mór* of Dunivaig and the Glens of Antrim, in an abortive plot to bring home James the Fat, the last survivor of the Albany Stewarts whom James I had annihilated in 1425, in order that he might be made king. The plot failed because of James the Fat's timely (for James I) death in the spring of 1429. But subsequent efforts by royal lieutenants to dismantle MacDonald power on the mainland by seizing control of Lochaber and the Great Glen ended in ignominious defeat at the hands of a Lordship army at Inverlochy in September 1431, swiftly followed by criticism of King James's policy in parliament the following month, and in effect the abandonment of direct royal intervention in the north and west. Mar, as the king's lieutenant, was left to provide a barrier to further Lordship expansion; but his death in 1435 was rapidly followed by Alexander MacDonald styling himself earl of Ross, and being officially recognised as such by the government after 1437.[9]

Nonetheless, it was a tenuous inheritance, dependent for its continuance on royal acquiescence of a *fait accompli*. The frightening alternative – for the MacDonalds – was the possibility of the re-emergence of a strong Crown with the power to further James I's Highland policies effectively – that is, to take over Ross, to acquire control of Lochaber, and to secure Kintyre and Knapdale, the latter lands part of the principality created by Robert III for his son Prince James (James I) in 1404, and therefore an obvious royal target. Certainly the violent events of 1428–31 had shown that the Crown could be threatened from abroad with Lordship assistance, that royal armies could be defeated by Lordship forces – as had happened at Inverlochy and at Drum nan coup in Strathnaver in September 1431 – and that the relatively good Crown–Lordship relations which had obtained in the late fourteenth century, prior to the death of the first Lord in 1387, were unlikely to return.

[9] Ibid., 74–5, 93–118, 135–40, 145–8, 157–60.

In the summer of 1449, therefore, the young fourth Lord and his advisers were probably looking both for an insurance policy to preserve the Lordship gains of the 1430s and 1440s, and also to take advantage of a Crown which was still in minority. This would explain the marriage of John MacDonald to Elizabeth Livingstone, the Chamberlain's daughter, an alliance which – in spite of the subsequent poetic condemnation of the Livingstones for climbing high above their station in Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*[10] – appeared to make very good sense at the time. It brought the young fourth Lord into close contact with the family which ran the court, controlled some of the principal royal castles, and had charge of the adolescent James II; the marriage might help to ease Crown–Lordship tensions; and, in the short term, if the contemporary Auchinleck chronicler is to be believed, it seems that James II encouraged the marriage, granting John MacDonald the custody of Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness for three years, and promising him good lordship.[11]

In effect, the king's good lordship lasted only a few weeks. Thereafter James II's actions signalled the reopening of crown aggression, a second and major factor in the weakening of the MacDonald Lordship. Apparently without warning, on Monday 23 September 1449, the king ordered the arrest of Chamberlain James Livingstone, the young fourth Lord's father-in-law, together with his brother Alexander, and Robert Livingstone, the Comptroller, and incarcerated them in Blackness Castle.[12] Further arrests followed, and in the parliament of January 1450 the Livingstones were forfeited with their allies the Dundases, and Alexander and Robert Livingstone were executed. The principal charge brought against the entire family, the treasonable incarceration of James I's widow, Queen Joan Beaufort, more than a decade before, is less than convincing, for both the main perpetrators of that act – Alexander Livingstone senior and his son James – survived the assault on their kin. Alexander appears to have been expelled from the kingdom, while James, according to the Auchinleck chronicler, 'eschapit subtelly fra the king and his counsall out of the abbay of halyrudhouss'. His daughter Elizabeth had preceded him; perhaps forewarned of the king's coup, she had fled from Dumbarton to her husband in Kintyre.[13] Furious retaliation followed for what the young fourth Lord can only have regarded as royal treachery. Grant has convincingly demonstrated that John MacDonald's revolt occurred in March of

[10] M. Stewart. 'Holland's "Howlat" and the fall of the Livingstons', *Innes Review*, xxvi (1975), 67–79.
[11] 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fo. 118v.
[12] Ibid., fo. 122r.
[13] *APS* ii, 61; McGladdery, *James II*, 50–4; 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fo. 122r.

1451 rather than 1452 as had previously been widely assumed.[14] Indeed, one might wonder why he waited so long, a full eighteen months after the fall of his Livingstone kinsmen. Possibly he delayed launching a rebellion until his father-in-law James Livingstone, who was clearly in royal custody for some time, was safely out of royal hands. But it seems much more likely that John MacDonald and his advisers wished to secure areas vital to the Lordship's mainland territories. So there was no immediate attack on Stewart lands in the Clyde, but rather a seizure of royal castles in the Great Glen and Badenoch, Inverness, Urquhart on Loch Ness, and Ruthven. According to the Auchinleck chronicler, MacDonald gave the keepership of Urquhart to his father-in-law James Livingstone, and 'kest dovne' Ruthven Castle.[15]

King James II, by his sudden strike against the Livingstones, had indicated that he saw his role as continuing his father's aggressive kingship. However, there was little that he could do personally to respond to the Lord of the Isles' revolt. But in April 1451, a month after the revolt, the king took an action which was to have far-reaching consequences: he granted the lordship of Badenoch with Ruthven Castle – or what was left of it – to Alexander Gordon, first earl of Huntly, the head of a family with expansionist ambitions in the north-east which by the beginning of the next century would have reached their full flowering.[16] In April 1451, however, Alexander Gordon was an earl of only six years standing; and his creation as such in 1445, at the outset of the Douglas–Livingstone ascendancy at court and during the minority of James II, was hardly likely to endear him to the adult king. One writer has described Huntly as the Crown's chief supporter in the north,[17] and this is true in the sense that he was prepared to attack rebels in pursuit of crown rewards. But the grant of Badenoch to Huntly by the king was probably little more than a retrospective royal nod of approval towards the earl in a local contest with the Lordship which was already under way, and in which the earl himself had become involved to further his family's territorial ambitions. Twenty years earlier, Huntly's father had been on the losing side against Lordship forces at the battle of Inverlochy; and a generation later, his son George, second Earl of Huntly, would be the principal royal enforcer following the forfeiture of the earldom of Ross.[18] The Stewart kings seem

14 A. Grant, 'The revolt of the Lord of the Isles and the death of the earl of Douglas, 1451–1452', *SHR* lx (1981), 169–74.

15 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fo. 118v.

16 *RMS* ii, no. 442.

17 Grant, 'Revolt of the Lord of the Isles', 171 n.6.

18 *Highland Papers*, i, 40–1; *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, vol. IV, ed. J. Stuart (Spalding Club, 1849), 133.

to have been more reluctant observers of the Huntly–Ross struggle than active participants in it. Certainly for James II there was no alternative but to approve the extension of Gordon power in Badenoch as a barrier to further Lordship expansion; but the king remained suspicious of Huntly aggrandisement. The following year, when Huntly defeated the rebel earl of Crawford at Brechin in what appears to have been another piece of Gordon private enterprise, there were no royal rewards forthcoming; and after 1455, James II seems to have been pursuing a deliberate policy of checking Huntly expansion in the earldom of Moray, frustrating both the earl and his son and at some point provoking their devastation of lands in Mar.[19]

In 1451, then, the power struggle in the Great Glen, Badenoch, and the Moray coastal plain was of vital interest to the young MacDonald earl of Ross and his Gordon opponent, Alexander, Earl of Huntly. To the king, however, this contest was little more than a sideshow, as he had become involved in the south in what was to prove the greatest conflict of the reign, with the Black Douglases – William, eighth Earl of Douglas and his brothers the earls of Moray and Ormond. This is not the place to consider that conflict in detail, but some mention must be made of that part of it in which the Lord of the Isles played a role, albeit a passive one, namely the famous (or notorious) Douglas–Ross–Crawford bond. A great deal of ink has been spilled in efforts to analyse this contract which brought together three unnatural allies – William, eighth Earl of Douglas, John MacDonald, earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles, and David Lindsay, fourth earl of Crawford – but as the bond itself no longer exists, its contents can only be a matter for speculation.[20] What it *may* have been, as Christine McGladdery suggests, was a bond of friendship bringing to an end territorial or other disputes, for example between the earl of Ross and the Douglas earls in the north-east.[21] Such an argument might well alarm James II, who, like most successful rulers, counted on being able to exploit local enmities to his advantage. However, we cannot be sure of this. We cannot even be sure when the bond was made. Opinions vary from 1445 (when of course two of the parties, the earls of Ross and Crawford, were different individuals) to 1451–2. Perhaps there is something to be said for a late date; for Douglas was present at court on 13 January 1452, yet needed a safe-conduct to visit his sovereign at Stirling a month later, two facts which

19 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fos. 123r–v; McGladdery, *James II*, 104–5; *ER* vi, 269.

20 See, e.g., Nicholson, *Later Middle Ages*, 358–9; Grant, 'Revolt of the Lord of the Isles', 172–4; G. Donaldson, *Scottish Kings* (Edinburgh 1967), 90–1; *ALI*, no. 45. The contemporary source for the bond is 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fo. 114v, with – probably – an oblique reference to it in the parliament of June 1452: *APS* ii, 73.

21 McGladdery, *James II*, 63–4.

would fit the making, or renewal, of the bond sometime between 13 January and Douglas's arrival at Stirling on 21 February 1452.[22]

There are only two certainties – first, that Douglas had made a bond with a rebel, John MacDonald, earl of Ross; and secondly that James II was so incensed with his failure to make Earl William 'break' the bond that this issue, rather than all the southern territorial disputes, provided the immediate cause of Douglas's killing, stabbed by the king himself and finished off by seven others present in an exuberant and gory demonstration of their loyalty to the Crown.[23]

In one sense, the death of the earl of Douglas at the king's hands may be seen to have worked to the advantage of John MacDonald. If James II had had problems before, these increased enormously after the Stirling killing; and for more than three years the king, preoccupied with intermittent civil wars and constant walking of a very dangerous political tightrope, could do little more than accept the status quo created by the fourth Lord's rebellion in the north. On the other hand, Douglas's murder, a dramatic display of the withdrawal of good lordship if ever there was one, probably prompted the rebellion which followed on the part of the Lindsay earl of Crawford; and according to Auchinleck, James, the new ninth earl of Douglas and brother of the murdered earl, had a meeting in Knapdale with the Lord of the Isles in May 1454, presumably in an attempt to win his support for the Douglas cause against the king. Auchinleck is both cryptic and obscure in his account of this meeting; having recorded the lavish gifts given to the fourth Lord by Douglas – wine, clothes, silver, silk and English cloth – he remarks: 'And quhat was thar amangis thaim wes counsall to conwines (i.e. convince); And thai demyt Ill all.'[24] This last may perhaps be read as an indication that the talks failed. Certainly John MacDonald gave no known direct military assistance to the Douglases for the remainder of the reign. His reward, if that is the correct word, was crown acceptance of his possession of some of the lands in the Great Glen which he had seized by rebellion in 1451. In spite of the Act of Annexation of 4 August 1455, by which the castle and lordship of Urquhart were specified as properties inalienably annexed to the royal patrimony, within a year a compromise solution had been reached whereby John MacDonald was formally granted the farms of Urquhart and Glenmoriston, worth

22 *RMS* ii, no. 523; 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fo. 114v.

23 Ibid., fos. 114v–115r.

24 Ibid., fo. 117r. Auchinleck dates the Knapdale meeting to 12 May 1452; but see M. Brown, *The Black Douglases: War and Lordship in Late Medieval Scotland, 1300–1455* (East Linton 1998), 303–4 and n. 33, in which a convincing argument is made for 1454. Michael Brown also argues that the 4th Lord's ultimate adherence to the king may have been influenced by the restoration to royal favour of his father-in-law James Livingstone: ibid., 311.

£100 annually, for life;[25] and he was to enjoy control of both these important strategic lordships for almost twenty years. By 1458 MacDonald is also described as sheriff of Inverness.[26] Thus in terms of his stewardship of the earldom of Ross which he had inherited from his father, the fourth Lord may at this stage be accounted a success, taking advantage of royal government weakness to press his territorial claims. Indeed, Ross seems to have been John MacDonald's main concern during the 1450s; surviving charter evidence from this decade places him at Dingwall and Inverness on many occasions, but seldom within the Lordship, and only once at its centre, Loch Finlaggan on Islay.[27]

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There was a price to be paid for all this, of course. It may be that in the fourth Lord's concentration on Ross – and, for that matter, his father's – the MacDonald hegemony was becoming too large to be run effectively by one leader, and indeed that the MacDonald kin and the major families within the original Lordship were looking to others to pursue a more aggressive policy in the west. It is surely significant that, although the fourth Lord appears to have made no response to Douglas appeals for aid after the killing of the eighth earl by James II, MacDonald's kinsman Donald *Balloch* of Dunivaig and the Glens, whose galleys had helped to secure victory for the Lordship at Inverlochy in 1431, launched a major assault on crown lands in the Firth of Clyde in July 1454, attacking Inverkip on the Renfrewshire mainland, harrying and burning on the Cumbraes, Bute and Arran, where Brodick Castle was taken and razed to the ground. According to Auchinleck, Donald *Balloch* had a force of 5–6,000 in a fleet of 100 galleys; and accompanying him was John Douglas, an illegitimate son of Archibald, fourth earl of Douglas.[28] This great raid is surely the Lordship's real answer to James II's acts of aggression and killing against the Douglases; and it also suggests that Donald *Balloch*, in 1454 a mature man in his forties, had assumed effective leadership of the forces of the Lordship, presumably with the concurrence of his young eighteen-year-old kinsman, the fourth Lord.

An even more striking example of the hawkish influence within the Lordship of Donald *Balloch* is to be found ten years later, in the rather fancifully named 'Treaty of Westminster–Ardtornish' of February 1462. James II had died at the siege of Roxburgh in August 1460, and royal

25 *APS* ii, 42; *ER* vi, 68, 217.

26 *ALI*, no. 69.

27 Ibid., nos. 53–69.

28 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fos. 117r–v. For the dating of Donald *Balloch*'s raid, see Steve Boardman's essay, chapter 9 above, note 82; and Brown, *Black Douglases*, 303–4 and n. 33.

government during the minority of his successor James III was not only initially weak but also divided in its attitude towards the Yorkist victor in the English civil war, King Edward IV.[29] Royal government weakness invited Lordship aggression, and on 19 October 1461 John MacDonald sent two ambassadors from his castle of Ardtornish on the Morvern coast with full power to negotiate a treaty on his behalf with Edward IV.[30] The first of those ambassadors, Ranald of the Isles, was Donald *Balloch*'s brother; and the treaty which followed in February 1462 is remarkable in the prominence which it accords to Donald and his family. John MacDonald, as earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles, is named first; but then follows not only Donald *Balloch*, but also his son and heir John of Islay. All three agreed to become liegemen of Edward IV of England, and to take the English king's part in wars in Scotland or Ireland in return for an annual pension; but the most interesting part of the indenture is the proposed territorial division of Scotland should the country be conquered and brought under the overlordship of Edward IV. In that event, all of Scotland north of the Forth would be divided equally among John, Earl of Ross, Donald *Balloch*, and the exiled James, Earl of Douglas, the last-named the mainstay of the Scottish 'fifth column' in England. Should Douglas play an active part in the conquest of Scotland for Edward IV, he should be restored to all his former possessions *south* of the Forth.[31]

This treaty is of great interest not because there was any real chance of its contents being implemented – an accommodation between the minority government of James III and that of Edward IV soon put paid to that – but because it reveals English perceptions of the relative importance of potential allies among the Scots. Donald *Balloch* was presumably highly rated by the Yorkists because he had already twice led expeditions against royal forces in Scotland with some success, and also on account of his direct links with Antrim in Northern Ireland. So Donald's brother negotiated the English treaty, and Donald himself and his son and heir John were to be two of its principal beneficiaries. And if the earl of Douglas were to be restored in the south of Scotland, then the country north of the Forth would have been divided between the two MacDonald kinsmen, John, Earl of Ross, and Donald *Balloch*.

How that division would have been made if the treaty had been followed up is indicated by John MacDonald's activities in the early 1460s. For at the outset of the reign of James III, the fourth Lord is to be found mainly, if not exclusively, in the north-east. He was apparently at Rosemarkie

29 For a discussion of Anglo-Scottish relations in the early 1460s, see N. Macdougall, *James III: A Political Study* (Edinburgh 1982), 57–61.

30 *ALI*, no. 74.

31 Ibid., no. 75.

when summoned to attend the parliament of February 1461, a summons which may have been prompted by claims that he had appropriated to himself crown revenues in Moray amounting to over £200 Scots.[32] Subsequently he was summoned to answer charges of treason – the seizure of royal ferms and victuals at Inverness – in a parliament which was to have been held in Aberdeen in June 1462; there is documentary evidence that such a parliament was planned, but it did not take place because the king did not travel north at that time.[33] In the spring of 1463 Ross laid waste crown lands in the vicinity of Inverness, and in August 1464 he was confronted by Bishop Kennedy and the entire royal Council at Inverness on the young James III's first northern progress. On this occasion Ross admitted to the seizure of £74.12s.3d. from Inverness burgh customs.[34] All this evidence suggests strongly that John MacDonald's main interest lay in consolidating and extending his power in Ross and the Moray coastal plain, acting aggressively in the expectation – incorrect as events proved – that a Stewart minority government would be too weak to resist. Probably, therefore, the fourth Lord's contemporary alliance with Edward IV was made with the same aim of securing and extending his father's difficult north-eastern legacy.

By contrast, in the 1460s and 1470s John MacDonald appears to have played little part in the politics of the Lordship proper, and it seems probable that Donald *Balloch* and his son John were the real makers of policy in the west, and would have expected to succeed to the Lordship if the English treaty of 1462 had borne fruit. Even as things stood, the fourth Lord seems to have spent much time negotiating with the royal government in response to charges which should have been brought against others. Thus it may be that the MacDonald Lordship of the Isles was already, as early as the 1460s and perhaps much earlier, a house divided, with the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the Glens of Antrim, in the persons of the hawkish Donald *Balloch* and his family, challenging what Dean Monro calls the 'royal blude of Clandonald' in the person of John MacDonald, fourth Lord.[35] In this sense, the latter's preoccupation with the earldom of Ross proved an Achilles' Heel, for it was in Ross that the MacDonalds were most vulnerable; and the loss of that earldom in 1475–6 would make the fourth Lord's position in the Isles untenable.

32 *ER* vii, pp. xxxix–xl, 20. The revenues in question were appropriated from the former Douglas earldoms of Moray and Ormond, which had come into crown hands by forfeiture as recently as 1455.

33 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fo. 120v; *ER* vii, 143.

34 Ibid., vii, 296–7.

35 *Monro's Western Isles of Scotland and Genealogies of the Clans*, ed. R. W. Munro (Edinburgh 1961), 57.

An obligation of 8 October 1475 reveals the extent of Donald *Balloch*'s power. His kinsman the earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles had shortly before granted to John Davidson the lands of Greenan on the Ayrshire coast; but it was Donald *Balloch*, described in the obligation as the fourth Lord's *'primus et principalis conciliarius'*, who was required to defend Davidson in his Ayrshire lands.[36] And when Donald died, sometime between August 1476 and June 1481, it was not only to the Lord of the Isles, but also to Donald's son and successor John – who had been associated with his father in the treaty of Westminster–Ardtornish of 1462 – that Edward IV looked for assistance against James III in the Anglo-Scottish war of 1480–2.[37] Presumably the English king was unaware of John MacDonald's political impotence; for the fourth Lord had demonstrably failed in the Isles by this stage; his inheritance had proved too much for him, and the struggle, both in Ross and in the Lordship, had already passed to stronger and more ruthless men.

Indeed, there can be little doubt that John MacDonald's personality played a major role in the collapse of the Lordship. He was of course unfortunate to succeed at the age of only fifteen, and doubly unfortunate that his marriage to Elizabeth Livingstone in 1449 rapidly lost its political *raison d'être* with the fall of the Livingstones a few weeks later. Also, there can be little doubt that during his minority, the crucial early years of the 1450s, decisions affecting the future of Ross and the Lordship of the Isles were being made for him by others. Yet when all this has been said in mitigation, it is hard to forget the Sleat *seanchaidh* Hugh Macdonald's damning verdict on the fourth Lord as 'a meek, modest man and a scholar, more fit to be a churchman than to command so many irregular tribes of people'.[38] John's weakness, according to the same source, was to attempt to retain the allegiance of the important families of the Isles through a policy of bestowing gifts of lands and possessions, thereby greatly diminishing his own rents and impoverishing his family. The *seanchaidh* specifically mentions MacDonald generosity to the MacLeans, who received the lordship of Morvern; and the record evidence bears this out, with extensive grants not only in Morvern but also in Lochaber, Mull and Jura to MacLean of Lochbuie.[39] Such grants undoubtedly gave the major Lordship families – the MacLeans of Duart and Lochbuie, the MacLeods of Lewis,

36 *ALI*, no. 107. It has been suggested to me by David Sellar that Donald *Balloch*'s title in this obligation of *primus et principalis conciliarius* of the earl of Ross might mean that Donald had been chosen as a tanist within the Lordship.

37 *CDS* iv, no. 1469. The name of John, 4th Lord, omitted by Bain, should be included in Edward IV's commission: see *ALI*, p. lxxviii.

38 *Highland Papers*, i, 47.

39 Ibid.; *ALI*, nos. 72, A42–A45.

Dunvegan and Harris – good reason to support the MacDonald Lordship against external (and internal) threats, but only so long as the head of Clan Donald remained firmly in control. When, as in the case of the fourth Lord, he was simultaneously and successfully challenged by his king *and* his own kin, the Lordship families' problem of allegiance became acute.

There was also a further, perhaps major, problem, created by John MacDonald's wife, Elizabeth Livingstone. Although MacDonald–Livingstone relations may have been cordial as late as 1461 – according to Auchinleck, both the fourth Lord and his Livingstone father-in-law were present at James III's first parliament in February of that year[40] – by January of 1464 Elizabeth was to be found complaining to the pope that her husband had ejected her both from cohabitation with him and from his lands, in spite of the fact that the marriage had been properly consummated and that she had borne him offspring. Children of this marriage cannot however be identified, and the marital break-up may have been caused by the fourth Lord's fears for the succession to the Lordship; thus by 1464 he was cohabiting with what his wife's petition calls 'a certain adultress'. By contrast, Elizabeth's real fears may have been the prospect of losing lands in Ross acquired through her marriage; and a decade later the situation had deteriorated still further. Another petition, presumably sent to the pope after John MacDonald's forfeiture of Ross (as he is referred to only as Lord of the Isles), omitted to claim the birth of children by the marriage, but tried a different tack, namely that when Elizabeth had been pregnant, her husband had imprisoned her and attempted to poison her. She had therefore fled from the Isles to the court of the queen of Scots (at Stirling), where in March 1478 she was still living. It is difficult to date these dramatic events, but it seems most likely that Elizabeth's flight preceded her petition by quite some time, perhaps a few years, and certainly occurred before the MacDonald forfeiture of Ross in December 1475; for as early as the following February, Elizabeth received from the Crown extensive lands in Ross, Moray, Aberdeenshire, and Ayrshire for her maintenance. These grants, it was claimed, were made for service to the late James II, James III himself and his queen, Margaret of Denmark, and because Elizabeth had given no assistance to John MacDonald in his treasons.[41] All this suggests that the MacDonald–Livingstone marital estrangement was long-standing; it may even have gone back to the 1450s, within a few years of the wedding, when the Livingstones, newly rehabilitated at court after their spectacular fall in 1449, must have found their family connection with a rebellious Highlander difficult to live with. And

40 'Auchinleck Chronicle', fo. 120r.

41 *Highland Papers*, iv, 206–9; *RMS* ii, no. 1227.

by the 1460s, when Elizabeth Livingstone was becoming, for whatever reason, less and less of an asset to her husband, she may well have been developing into more and more of an asset to the royal government. It is difficult to believe, for example, that John MacDonald's 1462 Westminster–Ardtornish treaty with Edward IV remained a secret from James III until after the Anglo-Scottish treaty of 1474; certainly it must have been 'leaked', at the latest, when Elizabeth Livingstone fled for succour to the enigmatic but politically shrewd Margaret of Denmark.

Thereafter John MacDonald became little more than a observer at the dismemberment of his own empire. In October 1475 he was summoned to answer charges of treason which included the making of treasonable leagues with Edward IV and with the forfeited James, Earl of Douglas – a clear reference to 1462 – the usurpation of royal authority by making his bastard son Angus his lieutenant, and the besieging of Rothesay Castle and laying waste of the island of Bute.[42] This last charge may in fact relate to Donald *Balloch's* great raid on the Clyde in 1452, for which John MacDonald as Lord of the Isles was now called to answer; but it is strange that the indictment does not specify Ross's own undoubted rebellion of March 1451, which had resulted in the seizure of Inverness and Urquhart, and the assault on Ruthven in Badenoch.

In any event, John MacDonald failed to appear in parliament at Edinburgh on 1 December 1475, and sentence of forfeiture was duly passed by Chancellor Avandale.[43] In the same week, commissions of lieutenancy were granted to four magnates – John Stewart, Lord Darnley, styled (briefly) earl of Lennox, Colin Campbell, first earl of Argyll, John Stewart, earl of Atholl, and George Gordon, second earl of Huntly – to execute the forfeiture.[44] There followed vigorous action on the part of at least two of them – Atholl and Huntly. Atholl would be rewarded – belatedly – with a royal grant of the forest of Cluny and park of Laighwood in Perthshire in March 1481, expressly for his trouble and expense in suppressing the rebellion of John of the Isles.[45] But Huntly's intervention appears to have been even more decisive; sometime before 28 March 1476 he had recovered Dingwall Castle, at the heart of the earldom of Ross, and had invaded Lochaber with great success. James III, writing to the earl, promised to reward him, at the same time exhorting Huntly to be 'of gude perseverance and continuance in the invasion of our said rebellis'.[46]

42 *APS* ii, 109–10.
43 Ibid., 111.
44 Inveraray, Inveraray Castle, Argyll Muniments; *RMS* ii, nos. 1210–12; Macdougall, *James III*, 121–2.
45 Blair Atholl, Blair Castle, Atholl Charters, Box 13, Parcel vii.
46 *Spalding Miscellany*, iv, 133.

Huntly needed no second bidding. His Commission of Lieutenancy simply gave him royal authority to pursue a feud with John MacDonald which had been under way at least since the spring of 1474.[47] Indeed, the Huntly–Ross feud may be said to have its origins in James II's grant of Badenoch to Alexander, first Earl of Huntly, in April 1451.[48] The second earl is likely to have been one of the main instigators in urging the forfeiture of Ross; and clearly he was off his mark earlier than anyone else, launching attacks on Lochaber and Ross in the space of a few months. He clearly hoped to be rewarded by the king with the keepership of Dingwall Castle; although denying Huntly this office, the devious king encouraged further assaults on Ross's territories in the Great Glen by granting to Huntly a fee of 100 merks from the ferms of Urquhart and Glenmoriston. These lands, together with the keepership of Urquhart Castle – which had been in John MacDonald's hands for a quarter of a century – had been granted to Huntly by July 1476; and by 1478 the earl had also been reappointed as bailie of the crown lands of Petty, Brachly, and Strathnairn in Moray, lands whose revenues the earl of Ross had appropriated in the early 1460s.[49] These moves by Huntly and the king effectively elevated the Huntly–Ross feud to the level of national politics, and helped to promote a war in Ross and its adjoining territories which would explode intermittently over the next thirty years. But the winners, without a doubt, were George Gordon, second earl of Huntly, who at his death in 1501 was James IV's Chancellor, and was buried in Cambuskenneth Abbey near James III and Margaret of Denmark; and his son and successor Alexander, third earl, who both inherited and built upon a huge Gordon sphere of influence in northern Scotland.

The losers were the MacDonalds, in the first instance John MacDonald himself. On 10 July 1476, before a very full assembly of parliament, he appeared and submitted to the royal will. He was stripped of the title of earl of Ross, the earldom being annexed to the domains of the Crown; James III was to have the liberty to grant Ross to his second son James, and in fact he did so in 1481. In addition, however, John MacDonald was deprived of the sheriffships of Inverness and Nairn, together with their castles; and the Crown also struck at the MacDonald heartland by forfeiting the lordships of Knapdale and Kintyre.[50] Five days later, John received a new crown charter of Islay and his other Hebridean lands, together with the mainland territories of Morvern, Garmoran, Lochaber, Duror and Glencoe, Kingedward and Greenan. These were entailed upon his legitimate male heirs, whom failing his illegitimate sons Angus and

47 *TA* i, 48.
48 *RMS* ii, no. 442.
49 *Spalding Miscellany*, iv, 134.
50 *APS* ii, 113.

John, to be held for the customary services performed by other barons and for obedience to the laws and customs of the kingdom.[51]

* * *

In many respects, these agreements of July 1476 amounted to the real forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles. For John MacDonald had lost far more than Ross; the surrender to the Crown of Knapdale and Kintyre (although some of the Lordship lands therein were subsequently regranted to John) greatly weakened the Lordship; and John's rather tame acceptance of his demotion to a lordship of parliament undermined his authority – or what was left of it – in the Isles and created enormous problems for his son and heir. The scene was set for a long struggle in the Isles and Ross, as the main branches of Clan Donald sought to dominate both areas, while the Lordship families, MacLeans, MacLeods, and MacNeills, who had prospered under a period of extensive MacDonald grants, tried to ally themselves with the likely winner. There followed, as the author of *The Book of Clanranald* aptly puts it, 'a great struggle among the Gael for power'.[52]

John MacDonald's designated heir, Angus (Angus Óg) soon emerged as a resolute and capable warlord who refused to accept the imposed settlement of 1476; and from the late 'seventies his aim seems to have been nothing less than the recovery by force of arms of both Ross and those areas of the Lordship which had been surrendered by his father.[53] Initially Angus may have tried to secure his father's support for resistance to crown annexation of Knapdale; for in April 1478 parliament accused the fourth Lord of 'stuffing' Castle Sween in Knapdale with men, victuals, and arms of war. John MacDonald may have been summoned to answer for acts which in fact had been committed by his warlike son; probably fearful of losing his Lordship altogether, he again came to Edinburgh to submit to the king, and duly received a confirmation of his 1476 charter.[54] He also received the support of one of the greatest magnates in the kingdom – Colin Campbell, first earl of Argyll, Master of the Royal Household and future Chancellor, an individual who managed to reconcile the functions of Highland clan chief and principal 'man of business' at the Stewart court, and to profit enormously from both. It is dangerous to assume Campbell–MacDonald enmity in the late fifteenth century because we are so familiar with its most dramatic manifestation, the Massacre of Glencoe, at the end of the seventeenth; in fact, once John MacDonald had accepted that his only future lay in behaving as a loyal vassal of the Crown, Argyll – and his son and heir Archibald, second Earl –

51 *RMS* ii, no. 1246.
52 *Reliquiae Celticae*, ii, 163.
53 *Highland Papers*, i, 48–9.
54 *APS* ii, 115; *RMS* ii, no. 1410.

though of course continuing to pursue Campbell expansionist aims, might well act as a prop for the shaky Lordship; and it is significant that the second earl of Argyll took no part in the eventual forfeiture of 1493.

In any event, Angus of the Isles is soon to be found taking on his father – Hugh Macdonald's story of the fourth Lord's cursing of his son relates to this period – the earl of Argyll, the earl of Atholl, and the forces of the Lordship families, apparently with remarkable success. He was aided in his efforts by the virtual collapse of effective Stewart government; for James III, although he managed to gather in some rents from Ross for the first time in 1479, was in the same year confronted by parliamentary complaints about 'the gret trubill that now is in ross, caithness and suthirland'; within a year he was at war with his former ally Edward IV of England; in 1482–3 he faced a major domestic crisis in which the lead was taken by members of his own family, and which he only just survived; and in the early months of 1488 he was confronted with a massive rebellion to which he eventually succumbed at the battle of Sauchieburn.[55] Periods of royal Stewart weakness traditionally provided a springboard for Lordship gains; and in the short term Angus of the Isles achieved some spectacular successes. On some date during the Anglo-Scottish war of 1480–2 – 1481 is probably the most likely – he rounded Ardnamurchan point with a large fleet and won a convincing sea-battle, generally described as the battle of Bloody Bay, near Tobermory, against the galleys of the MacLeods of Lewis and Harris, MacLean of Duart and MacNeill of Barra, all of whom had come to the Sound of Mull at the request of Argyll, Atholl, and Angus's father, the fourth Lord. Angus's decision to fight rather than negotiate was vindicated by his victory; and he may well have been supported by Donald *Balloch*'s son, John of Dunivaig, whom Edward IV of England was seeking to enlist in 1481.[56]

Probably in the same year Angus won another victory, this time over a royal army led by John Stewart, earl of Atholl, at Lagabraad, somewhere in Ross; if Hugh Macdonald is to be believed, 517 of Atholl's force were killed, which suggests a very sizeable battle; and the follow-up seems to have been the occupation of Easter Ross by Angus, possibly reoccupying Dingwall Castle for the two years 1481–3.[57] Thus, at least temporarily, Angus had recovered many of his father's lost territories. But the task proved too much for him, and with the ending of the English war and domestic Stewart crisis in the spring of 1483, Angus appears to have retreated to the west, burning Inverness as he withdrew. The two most prominent royalist northern earls, Atholl and Huntly (who had played a

55 *APS* ii, 122; Macdougall, *James III*, chs. 8 and 11 (for the crises of 1482 and 1488).
56 *Highland Papers*, i, 49–50; *CDS* iv, no. 1469.
57 *Highland Papers*, i, 49.

major part in the crisis of 1482–3, initially by seizing James III and latterly by backing him against his brother, the duke of Albany) had returned to their estates by the autumn of 1483; wisely, Angus MacDonald appears to have stayed out of Huntly's way, for we find him back in the Isles in November 1485, apparently reconciled to his father and conveying land in Mull with the consent of the Council of the Lordship.[58] However, the great magnate rebellion of 1488, in which Angus's father-in-law Argyll was prominently involved against James III, again provided the Master of the Isles with an opportunity to attempt to recover Ross. Either in this year or the following one, when a second huge rebellion distracted the country for about nine months, Angus seized Inverness. Here, according to the Sleat *seanchaidh*, his father's curse caught up with him. Angus's Irish harper Art O'Carby had composed an obscure prophetic poem about the danger to the rider of the dapple horse if there was poison in his long knife, which he called Gallfit. Suiting the action to the words, the harper rose in the night and cut Angus's throat while he was asleep.[59]

No subsequent military leader within the Lordship would present a similar threat, or indeed win victories against royal armies; but many tried. Alexander MacDonald of Lochalsh, Angus's cousin, launched a devastating raid on Inverness in 1491; but later the same year he was heavily defeated by the MacKenzies at Park near Strathpeffer.[60] He continued, however, to grant charters within the Lordship in 1492 – from Colonsay, Oronsay, and Iona, two of them with the consent of the Council of the Isles, and one only in association with his uncle, John MacDonald, the fourth Lord.[61] Clearly, therefore, whatever the attitude of those in charge of the minority government of James IV, Alexander of Lochalsh – *not* the fourth Lord – was accepted by the Council of the Isles as effective Lord of the Isles, with the power to grant lands and offices within the Lordship. Indeed, John, fourth Lord, made no known independent grants in the Isles between 1486 and his last charter, made at Aros on Mull on 6 December 1492, giving the patronage of the church of Kilberry in Knapdale to Robert Colquhoun, bishop of Argyll.[62] So the charter evidence of 1492 shows the last Lord of the Isles dithering between collaboration with his hawkish nephew, Alexander of Lochalsh, and granting church patronage to the royalist bishop of Argyll. Divisions amongst the Lordship families, together with the disintegrating authority of John MacDonald, probably convinced those in charge of James IV's

[58] *ALI*, no. 119.
[59] *Highland Papers*, i, 51–2. Angus was still alive on 8 August 1488: *ALI*, no. 121.
[60] *Highland Papers*, i, 55.
[61] *ALI*, nos. 122–4.
[62] Ibid., no. 125.

government that the time had come to launch a full-scale assault in the West; and Jean Munro argues convincingly that those loyal to the Crown within the Lordship expected firm intervention by the king.[63]

The result, the forfeiture of the Lordship in the parliament of May–June 1493, is a well-known event. Yet it is also rather a mysterious one, partly because there is no surviving record of it in the parliamentary records, but also because, although the forfeiture is frequently described as the act of a dynamic young ruler determined to make his mark in the Isles, in fact James IV is unlikely to have been its instigator, for he did not take personal charge of royal government for another two years.[64] And perhaps most strange of all, the earl of Argyll (Archibald, second earl) not only took no part in the forfeiture but suffered a total political eclipse between 1493 and 1495.[65]

The key to this mystery is provided by the great political maverick of the reign, Archibald Douglas, fifth earl of Angus. This ambitious but unsubtle individual had contrived to join the winning side in the rebellion against James III in 1488, and yet was denied major office under the early governments of his successor; indeed, he lost much of his influence as a powerful border magnate, and by 1491 had become so jaundiced with the regime that he entered into treasonable negotiations with Henry VII of England and had to endure a siege of his castle of Tantallon by James IV in October of that year.[66] However, his political comeback was spectacular; at the turn of the year 1492–3 the Chancellor, Colin Campbell, first earl of Argyll, died, and Angus, thanks partly to his growing friendship with the young king and partly to the fact that Angus's niece, Marion Boyd, was James IV's first mistress, managed to secure the Chancellorship for himself. It seems likely that he planned to use this powerful secular office to develop his influence in Ayrshire and the west, where he had had roots since his Boyd marriage a quarter of a century before. This also meant taking part in the major feud against Hugh, Lord Montgomery, the new earl of Argyll's brother-in-law, and in removing Campbell influence from royal government.[67] It was a risky and only temporarily successful plan; and one of its first fruits was the forfeiture of the Lordship in the summer of 1493. The young king may, of course, have actively sought this, together with other frustrated members of the government and Lordship families who longed to settle the issue of their allegiance; but that Angus was the principal instigator of the forfeiture is strongly suggested by the

[63] J. Munro, 'The Lordship of the Isles', in L. Maclean (ed.), *The Middle Ages in the Highlands* (Inverness 1981), 33.
[64] N. Macdougall, *James IV* (Edinburgh 1989), 112–15.
[65] Ibid., 101.
[66] *TA i*, 181, 182.
[67] Macdougall, *James IV*, 97–9.

very first royal grant of Lordship lands, that of the lands of Greenan in Ayrshire, which went to Angus's second son William, displacing the Davidson family who had held Greenan for a generation and who were to protest against the arbitrary change for the next twenty years.[68]

However, there can be no doubt that, after years of uncertainty in the west, the forfeiture of 1493 produced a dramatic response and changed the lives of those directly affected by it. John MacDonald, the former fourth Lord, had come almost to the end of the road; he gave up the unequal struggle of trying to reconcile the Crown and the forces of the Lordship, and by 1494 had been brought into the royal household with a generous annual pension of £133.6s.8d.[69] This last may have been a security measure, to prevent John being used by those who wished to restore the Lordship. But there were other methods of doing this than making use of the enfeebled John MacDonald; for he had a grandson, Donald *Dubh*, the son of Angus of the Isles and a daughter of the first earl of Argyll, a child of about three years of age in 1493. Sometime after the forfeiture, John Stewart, earl of Atholl, removed Donald *Dubh* from the keeping of his mother and transferred him to Argyll's powerful stronghold of Inchconnell, on an island in Loch Awe.[70] The possession of the person of the direct heir to the forfeited Lordship gave Argyll a powerful bargaining counter in his – temporarily – strained relations with the royal government.

It remained for that government to make the forfeiture effective if it could. As the start of what a later parliament would rather grandly describe as 'the daunting of the Isles', James IV, attended by his mentor, Chancellor Angus, and the royal Council, sailed north, reaching Dunstaffnage Castle on the Firth of Lorn by 18 August 1493.[71] We have no record of what happened there, and while it is tempting to envisage a grand set-piece, with the galleys of John of Dunivaig, Alexander of Lochalsh, and Maclan of Ardnamurchan, emerging from the mists of the Firth or the Sound of Mull, bearing the leaders of the Lordship to submit to their masterful sovereign, the facts suggest that little was achieved. It is possible that John of Dunivaig and Alexander of Lochalsh were knighted on this occasion; but if so, both can hardly have failed to remark the absence from the king's party of Archibald Campbell, earl of Argyll – and that in the heart of his lordship of Lorn. The conclusions which both men might have drawn from Argyll's absence could have been that their submission was a waste of time, that the crown magnate with whom they had to deal most in the west was excluded, and that James IV's government was weak and divided.

68 *RMS* ii, no. 2172; *ALI*, nos. A40, A68.
69 *ER* x, 534; *TA* i, 233–4.
70 *Highland Papers*, i, 50.
71 *RMS* ii, no. 2171.

Certainly both men remained conspicuously undaunted, for both were in rebellion the following year. They received short shrift, not through direct crown action, but because of the ambitions of John Maclan of Ardnamurchan, who although the representative of a junior branch of the MacDonald kin seems to have aspired to dominate a revived Lordship; as a first step he could kill its leaders and secure substantial rewards from a grateful government.[72] His success was total. Some time in 1494, Maclan killed Alexander of Lochalsh – who may have led an abortive raid on Ross in that year – on the Isle of Oronsay. The place of Alexander's death suggests treachery, for Oronsay had been used as a meeting place for the Council of the Isles as recently as August 1492, on which occasion both Alexander of Lochalsh and Maclan had been present. It was possibly during a similar meeting in 1494 that Alexander was assassinated at Maclan's instigation.[73] As for Sir John of Dunivaig, Donald *Balloch*'s son, his defiance of James IV was impressive but short-lived. The area of potential conflict was the Kintyre peninsula; the king summoned part of the host to meet him at Tarbert, and made repairs to the castle there, and to Dunaverty at the southern end of the peninsula. However, according to the Sleat *seanchaidh*, John of Dunivaig stormed Dunaverty and killed King James's keeper, displaying the corpse outside the castle wall in view of the departing royal fleet.[74] By September of 1494 Sir John had been summoned for treason;[75] and for a second time it was Maclan of Ardnamurchan who did the government's work for it. Before the end of the year he surprised and captured Sir John and three of his sons – John *Cattanach*, Ragnall the Red, and Domnall the Freckled – at the very centre of the Lordship, Loch Finlaggan on Islay. All four were brought to Edinburgh, to languish in prison until 1499, when James IV, still seeking a final solution to the Lordship problem which he had been bequeathed, hanged them on the same gallows.[76] The immediate beneficiary of their removal and ultimate

72 John Maclan of Ardnamurchan's ambition to dominate the Lordship may originate in the predominance of his branch of the family in the early 14th century. Around 1341 his ancestor Angus, founder of the Maclans of Ardnamurchan, had received a royal charter of the island of Islay, all of Kintyre, Gigha, Jura, Colonsay, the lands of Morvern, and some lands in Mull (*RMS* i, app. Ii, no. 114; *ALI*, no. A1). The grant does not appear to have taken effect; but if it had, it would have placed the Maclans of Ardnamurchan at the very heart of the Lordship of the Isles. See also *Highland Papers*, i, 45.
73 Ibid., i, 56, 60; *ALI*, no. 123.
74 *TA* i, 217, 237, 244, 253–4; D. Gregory, *A History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland, 1493–1625* (Edinburgh 1836), 89.
75 *TA* i, 238–9.
76 Gregory, *Western Highlands*, 89–90, gives 1494 as the date of the capture *and* execution of Sir John and his sons; but a more reliable source is the contemporary Ulster annalist, who places the executions in 1499: *Ann. Ulster*, 1499. The location

demise was MacIan of Ardnamurchan, who received extensive lands on Islay and the office of crown bailie on the island; and by March of 1507 MacIan's power in the Isles was so formidable that Hugh O'Donnell of Tyrone, styling himself Prince of Ulster, wrote to James IV asking him to provide him with 4,000 fighting men, to be led by John MacIan of Ardnamurchan, 'the chief of his clan', who would choose such 'leaders of Clandonnell' as he wished to accompany him.[77] More immediately, MacIan's new status as royal hatchet-man in the Isles was confirmed by the king's visit, in May 1495, to MacIan's castle of Mingary on the Ardnamurchan peninsula.[78] This was significant because James had taken effective control of royal government only two months before, and because the visit to Mingary would prove to be the king's last excursion to the former Lordship; henceforth, to borrow a twentieth-century Glaswegian phrase, James IV's trips would only be 'doon the watter', within the confines of the Firth of Clyde.

For the truth was that the young king had inherited rather than created a policy in the Isles; that his interest in the west was confined to the matters of establishing some kind of authority in a sensitive area, of drawing rents from the forfeited Lordship, and perhaps above all of providing adequate protection for the Stewart lands in the Firth of Clyde. In this last area we find personal royal intervention on a scale unmatched elsewhere.

Consider for a moment the eastern side of the peninsula of Kintyre. As Dunaverty Castle at its tip had proved only too vulnerable in 1494, in 1495 James began the construction of a new royal fortress at Kilkerran, within the present-day Campbeltown Loch. In 1498 he paid three visits to it, and spent no less than two months of the summer in it, receiving submissions and promises of loyalty from some Lordship families.[79] Further north on the same coast, in 1508 he had the Cistercian abbey of Saddell suppressed and its endowments annexed to the bishopric of Argyll and erected into the free barony of Saddell. The recipient of royal favour in this case was the young, loyalist David Hamilton, bishop of Argyll, who was also empowered to build castles for the barony's defence; some time before February 1512 he had completed an impressive tower house.[80] A few miles further north, at Carradale, the spectacularly sited Aird's Castle, a former Lordship fortress, was granted to the royal familiar Adam Rede of Barskimming in September 1498, on condition that Rede installed

of their capture – Finlaggan on Islay – suggests treachery on the part of MacIan, with the arrests taking place during a meeting of the Council of the Isles.

77 *ALI*, nos. A57, A58; *RMS* ii, no. 2895; *The Letters of James the Fourth, 1505–1513*, ed. R. L. Mackie (Edinburgh 1953), 70–1.

78 *RMS* ii, no. 2253.

79 *TA* i, 382, 389–90; *RMS* ii, nos. 2424–40.

80 *RMS* ii, no. 3170; *RSS* i, no. 2369.

six archers well supplied with bows and arrows and remained in the castle during the king's wars with the Islesmen.[81] Further north still, on the same side of the Kintyre peninsula though technically within the bounds of Knapdale, Skipness Castle went first to another royal familiar, Sir Duncan Forrester, and subsequently to Archibald, second earl of Argyll;[82] and the royal castle of Tarbert, strategically the most important of all, was extensively rebuilt on James IV's orders from 1494 onwards, and a new tower house added to the fortifications.[83] Tarbert was also James's last port of call in the Highland west, in 1500; and on the available evidence, one is tempted to speak of the royal 'daunting' of Eastern Kintyre and southern Knapdale rather than the 'daunting' of the Isles. For James IV, already attracted by the prospect of playing an important European role, had turned his eyes from the Clyde to the Forth; and his main enthusiasm, the creation of a royal navy, would find its outlets at Leith and Newhaven rather than Dumbarton.

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Thus it was largely left to others to make effective the forfeiture of the Lordship in 1493. What James IV clearly wanted was a quick solution to the problems which he had inherited; but in fact he had exacerbated them by first regranting lands to loyal Lordship families in 1495, and then issuing his Act of Revocation in March 1498 requiring immediate confirmation of recently granted Lordship charters – and at a price.[84] In any case, those chiefs who had been appeased by the king – MacLean of Duart, Alan, captain of Clan Cameron, and MacNeill of Barra – must have been thoroughly alarmed by an act of the Lords of Council of 3 October 1496, ordering that any royal summons issued against any person dwelling in the Lordship before 16 April 1497 was to be executed by the chief of his clan; any failure on the chief's part to do so would lead to proceedings being taken against him as though he were the defendant in the case.[85] Arguably this act made the position of chiefs who were as yet uncommitted difficult if not impossible with their clansmen, undermining their authority in an effort to drive them along the road towards acceptance of crown control of the Lordship. The main instigator of this insensitive act was Archibald, second Earl of Argyll, whom the king had brought back into the royal fold as Master of the Household in March 1495.[86] Two years

81 *RMS* ii, no. 2454.

82 RCAHMS, *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Argyll*, vol. I: *Kintyre* (Edinburgh 1971), 178.

83 *RSS* i, no. 413; *TA* i, 215; *ER* xi, 162.

84 *TA* i, 383.

85 *Acts of the Lords of Council in Civil Cases, 1496–1501*, ed. G. Neilson and H. Paton (Edinburgh 1918), 41.

86 *RMS* ii, no. 2240.

later, King James sacked Angus as Chancellor and replaced him with Huntly.[87] The great Highland magnates had come into their own at last.

Or so it seemed. On 22 April 1500 Argyll was appointed royal lieutenant within the old Lordship – excepting Kintyre and Islay – for a period of three years, with the power to make statutes in the king's name, to seize and execute rebels, to lay siege to their castles and homes, and where necessary to grant remissions.[88] Given the bewildering changes in royal policy since 1493, it must have seemed to many within the Lordship that what Argyll had been given was a royal commission which simply legalised further Campbell aggrandisement. Furthermore, the issue was complicated in August 1501, when a second commission of lieutenancy was issued, this time to Alexander Gordon, who had just succeeded his father as third earl of Huntly. Huntly's commission, unlike that of Argyll, was not subject to a time limit; and he was authorised to receive 'bandis and oblissingis' – in effect submissions – of magnates north of the Mounth, if necessary by force; he was also to collect royal rents in Lochaber and use force against anyone who resisted payment.[89] Huntly's remit – anywhere north of the Mounth – was geographically vast and imprecise, including large areas of the former Lordship of the Isles and the earldom of Ross; and the Gordon earl, hungry for power in the north and west, had already gained the trust of James IV through his involvement with the king's Act of Revocation of 1498, and its circulation to the Island chiefs.[90] Huntly also had useful connections in the north-west and the Isles; his father, the second earl, had probably received assistance from Hugh MacDonald of Sleat, John the fourth Lord's half-brother, in taking Dingwall Castle as long before as 1475; and Hugh himself had married MacIan of Ardnamurchan's daughter Finvola by 1469.[91] So there already existed dangerous rivalries amongst the MacDonald kin which the Gordon earls, father and son, were in a position to exploit.

Argyll had no such advantage. He was caught as the man in the middle, given temporary vice-regal powers which he was expected to use against recalcitrant Lordship families, by some of whom he was already regarded with deep suspicion. One of their leaders, Torquil MacLeod of Lewis, was Argyll's son-in-law, having married the earl's daughter Catherine as recently as 1498. Torquil's disaffection may have been caused primarily – and with some justification – by his fear of Huntly, whose 1501 lieutenancy was likely to be pursued much more vigorously than that given to

87 Ibid., nos. 2374, 2382.
88 *RSS* ii, nos. 413, 513, 520.
89 Ibid., nos. 722–3.
90 *TA* i, 383.
91 *ALI*, p. lxx, and no. 96.

Torquil's kinsman Argyll the previous year. To resist, Torquil MacLeod needed a cause; and he found it in a projected restoration of the MacDonald Lordship of the Isles. Probably some time in the autumn of 1501 – that is shortly after Huntly's royal commission – the MacDonalds of Glencoe released from captivity in Argyll's castle of Inchconnell on Loch Awe, Donald *Dubh*, grandson of John MacDonald, fourth Lord, an eleven-year-old youth who could be presented as the rightful heir to the forfeited Lordship.[92] As Argyll had taken charge of Donald *Dubh* as an infant in 1493, it may be that the earl also connived at his grandson's release in 1501 as a means of checking the growing power of his rival Huntly. Certainly by October of 1501, the king knew that Donald *Dubh* had been transferred to the custody of Torquil MacLeod of Lewis, and that royal plans for the former Lordship were in danger of total collapse.[93]

The Crown's response to these ominous changes was threefold: first, Torquil MacLeod was declared guilty of rebellion by the Lords of Council, who on 13 August 1502 decreed that Torquil had failed to show any title to his lands in Lewis, Skye, and Wester Ross, and ordained that his estates now belonged to the king (Argyll was – perhaps significantly – not present to condemn his new son-in-law).[94] Secondly, still more power was given to Alexander, third Earl of Huntly; on 21 March 1502, only six days after Torquil MacLeod had been cited as a rebel by the Lords of Council, Huntly was given a royal commission, together with Fraser of Lovat and Munro of Fowlis, authorising him to let the royal lands in Lochaber and Mamore for a period of five years to reliable men who would expel all 'trespassouris and brokin men'; and in addition Huntly and his two allies were empowered to let Torquil's lands of Assynt and Coigach in Wester Ross to 'gud trew men, being afald (i.e. afield, in the field) in our souerane lordis opinion', an indication that the Gordon earl was already in the field and had much support from those seeking to acquire Torquil's estates.[95] Huntly needed no second bidding to raise a royal army in Lochaber to attack all those who resisted paying the king's rents; and there is some evidence that he undertook a wholesale removal of sitting tenants from Lochaber in 1501–2.[96]

Thirdly, the king played his last Lordship card. In September and October of 1502 preparations were made for John MacDonald, the forfeited fourth Lord of the Isles, and as we have seen a court pensioner for the previous

92 Ibid., 313–14.
93 *RMS* ii, no. 2162; *Acts of the Lords of Council, 1501–1503*, ed. J. A. Clyde (Stair Soc., 1943), 174–5.
94 Ibid., 187.
95 *RSS* i, no. 792.
96 Ibid., nos. 723, 792.

eight years, to travel to the Isles and to Lochaber, presumably to earn his annual pension as part of a crown propaganda exercise in areas where King James might expect open rebellion as a response to his lieutenants' severity.[97] Producing John of the Isles, Donald *Dubh*'s grandfather, in the Highlands might well help to nip unrest in the bud. But John MacDonald probably never made the journey; for in January 1503 he fell ill and died at Dundee.[98] He was in his late sixties, but had arguably been a broken reed in the Isles for more than a quarter of a century; and his role in crown service was purely symbolic. But symbolism, when allied to deep-seated political grievances, can exercise a powerful influence; and following John MacDonald's death, the disaffected families in the Isles, Lochaber and Ross could claim with more conviction that they sought a restoration of the Lordship with Donald *Dubh* as the rightful heir of his recently deceased grandfather. Hence the royal government's repeated claim that Donald was the illegitimate son of an illegitimate son; but such statements appear to have had little effect in the Isles.

Donald *Dubh* was the necessary figurehead; the intrusion of Huntly into the Highland west was the grievance; and at Christmas 1503 Torquil MacLeod and Lachlan MacLean of Duart swept into the Gordon earl's Lordship of Badenoch, looting and burning.[99] Even more ominous, the royal lands on Bute had been assailed by Islesmen throughout the previous year, and so much damage was done that royal tenants on Bute were excused payment of rents for three years;[100] and the king was moved to summon parliament, the first to be held for eight years, on 18 December 1503. A week later the Christmas raid on Badenoch made the need to convene the estates even more urgent; and parliament met at Edinburgh on 11 March 1504.[101]

The Donald *Dubh* rising was the closest James IV, an able king, came to a major internal crisis during his adult rule. He dealt with it forcefully, even ruthlessly. At the very beginning of the parliament, he issued an act of revocation – the fifth of the reign – revoking not only all donations and gifts, but also statutes of parliament and general council 'and all vthir thingis done be him in tymis bigane othir hurtand his saule, his crovne or halikirk' – an enormous brief, open to any interpretation which King James wished to place on it. Above all, all revocations made in this way were to be 'put furtht of the bukis and writingis' – or, in modern parlance, shredded.[102] In

97 *TA* ii, 301, 344.
98 Ibid., 354, 357.
99 *APS* ii, 263.
100 *ER* xii, 247–8.
101 *TA* ii, 410; *APS* ii, 239.
102 *APS* ii, 240.

effect, the king was freeing himself of the Angus government's unhappy decisions regarding the Isles in 1493 – or indeed some of his own later schemes – by ordering their removal from the original records and making a new beginning in 1504.

We may pass over quickly the estates' efforts to create new sheriffdoms in Ross and Caithness, and the division of the Isles into north and south for judicial purposes. 'For lak and falt of Justice Airis', moaned the estates, 'the pepill ar almaist gane wild.' Yet these administrative plans were shelved in 1509; and the real problem confronting parliament in 1504 was of course to identify the rebels and crush the rebellion. As neither king nor estates seemed at all certain of the exact stance taken by some of the Lordship families even in 1504, we may be forgiven for failing to identify the rebels with any clarity now. There is no doubt, however, that MacLean of Duart was initially feared by the government because he was believed to have taken possession of Donald *Dubh*, and that his castle of Cairn na burgh in the remote Treshnish Isles, west of Mull, was besieged by a royal fleet largely for that reason. It is also likely that Archibald, second Earl of Argyll, had fallen under suspicion for a short time before and during the 1504 parliament, possibly for collusion with those who released Donald *Dubh*, possibly for allowing Torquil MacLeod and MacLean of Duart to pass through Argyll lands on their way to the Badenoch raid of 1503, certainly for failing to make his lieutenancy of 1500 a success in royal terms.[103] In the long run, the king discovered that there was no alternative to Argyll in the west; but even more striking was the further power given to Huntly in the north. Together with the earl of Crawford, the Earl Marischal, and Lord Lovat, Huntly was entrusted with the overall command of the royal forces sent to subdue 'the northt ylis'; as a first step, he was to lay siege to the castles of Strome and Eilean Donan in Wester Ross, the taking and garrisoning of which were regarded as 'rycht necessar for the danting of the Ilis'; James IV undertook to assist Huntly with a ship and artillery; and parliament recommended that the king entrust the Gordon earl with the building of a castle at Inverlochy on Loch Linnhe.[104]

The Donald *Dubh* revolt dragged on for two years, necessitating the summoning of a second parliament in 1506 and a revision of the government's list of forfeitures. But perhaps we should not exaggerate the threat which it posed to James IV's authority; for the temporary adherence to Donald *Dubh* by major Lordship families may have been inspired more by their desire to check MacIan of Ardnamurchan's growing power than by any affection for the legitimate heir to the MacDonald hegemony. In

103 For a full discussion of Argyll's position, see Macdougall, *James IV*, 183–5.
104 *APS* ii, 240, 248.

June 1506, the earl of Argyll, restored to favour at court, intervened to obtain a promise from MacIan that both MacLeans – of Duart and Lochbuie – would remain unharmed in their persons and goods for a year, and that in the meantime any disputes between MacIan and MacLean of Lochbuie would be submitted to the king and Council for arbitration.[105]

The extent of royal power delegated to James's lieutenant Huntly in the north is clearly demonstrated by what followed. John Ogilvy, sheriff-depute of Inverness, was given the unenviable task of summoning Torquil MacLeod of Lewis, who had retired to his castle of Stornoway with Donald *Dubh*, to appear to answer charges of treason in Edinburgh. Ogilvy, an understandably cautious man, chose to serve the summons at eleven o'clock on the morning of Christmas Eve 1505, but no nearer Stornoway than the market cross of the burgh of Inverness, more than a hundred miles and a good sea journey distant.[106] Torquil and Donald *Dubh*, no doubt enjoying Christmas in Stornoway Castle, may perhaps be forgiven for not having heard, far less responded to, the summons; and in any earlier reign they would probably have been able to sit on Lewis and defy the government with impunity. But in 1506 there was no hiding place even in the most remote territories of the Lordship. In late August or early September, Huntly, assisted by MacKay of Strathnaver and possibly also by the reconciled MacLeans, provided by the king with a hired ship, the 'Raven', and the royal gunner Robert Herwort, landed an expeditionary force on Lewis and even penetrated as far as Uig, on the west coast of the island. Most important of all, the Gordon earl secured the surrender of Stornoway Castle; by early September 1506, Donald *Dubh* was captured and remained a prisoner, either in Stirling or Edinburgh Castle, for almost the whole of the remainder of his life, while Torquil MacLeod fled and died, a forfeited rebel, five years later.[107] James IV visited both Badenoch and Inverness in the autumn of 1506, ostensibly en route for Tain in Easter Ross on pilgrimage, but probably also with a strategic purpose, to lend personal support to the recent gains made by his ruthless Gordon lieutenant; and in the summer of 1507, the king made his spectacularly swift ride to Tain, with only a few attendants, perhaps to demonstrate in a showy way that royal Stewarts were perfectly safe in Ross, the Achilles' Heel of the MacDonalds and their adherents.[108]

In the southern Isles, the king had finally been forced to use Argyll to restrain the activities of his over-zealous supporter MacIan of Ardnamurchan; but no such restraints were put on Alexander Gordon, third earl of

105 R. L. Mackie, *King James IV of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1958), 195–6.
106 *APS* ii, 263–4.
107 *TA iii*, 200, 209, 338, 340, 342–3; *ALI*, 313–14; *RSS i*, no. 1690; *RMS ii*, no. 3202.
108 Macdougall, *James IV*, 293–4.

Huntly, because King James had no wish – and arguably lacked the power – to control him. James needed Huntly to control the Northern Isles, Ross and the Great Glen, and royal grants poured in from 1506 onwards – commissions to set royal lands in Glengarry, Invergarry, and Knoydart, the hereditary sheriffship of Inverness, and the power to appoint deputies to the sheriff courts of Caithness, Ross, and Lochaber. By the early months of 1509, Huntly and his associates controlled almost the whole of Scotland north of the Great Glen, the lordships of Lochaber and Badenoch, and the huge tracts of Aberdeenshire territory which formed the heartland of the earldom. Between 1506 and 1508 Huntly was even employed as royal enforcer as far south as Perthshire, eventually being given the power to attack and arrest all those at the king's horn in Fortingall, Rannoch, and Lochaber.[109]

Times would change, of course. In a few years, James IV would die at Flodden with many of his magnates, including Argyll, who had temporarily sinned in 1493 and perhaps in 1501–4, and who atoned for these lapses by getting himself killed. Huntly, the ruthless loyalist and pragmatist, had the good sense to escape. And there would be further risings in the Isles, in 1513–15, 1516–19, 1529–31, 1539, and a final spectacular but abortive attempt to restore the Lordship in 1545. But the consistent objective of successive Stewart monarchs and their lieutenants throughout the fifteenth century – to reduce the threat which they perceived to emanate from the Lordship as early as Inverlochy in 1431, perhaps even from Harlaw twenty years earlier – had been achieved to the extent that James IV was concerned but not overly troubled by the major rising of 1504. He was not, after all, at the sieges of Cairn na burgh or Stornoway in person; he did not have to be.

In the last analysis, however, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Lordship collapsed not because of royal Stewart hostility, but because the MacDonald empire became too large for any single individual to control; and the accession of John MacDonald in 1449, a minor who grew up into a weak man, inevitably produced a major split amongst the MacDonald kin and confusion and unrest amongst the principal Lordship families. Paralleling this weakness was the unremitting hostility of three successive earls of Huntly, catalogued most clearly perhaps in the struggles over Badenoch and Ross from the 1450s onwards; and in the end this proved fatal.

109 *RSS* i, nos. 1283, 1344, 1532, 1543, 1579, 1668, 1773, 1820, 1825; *RMS* ii, no. 3286.