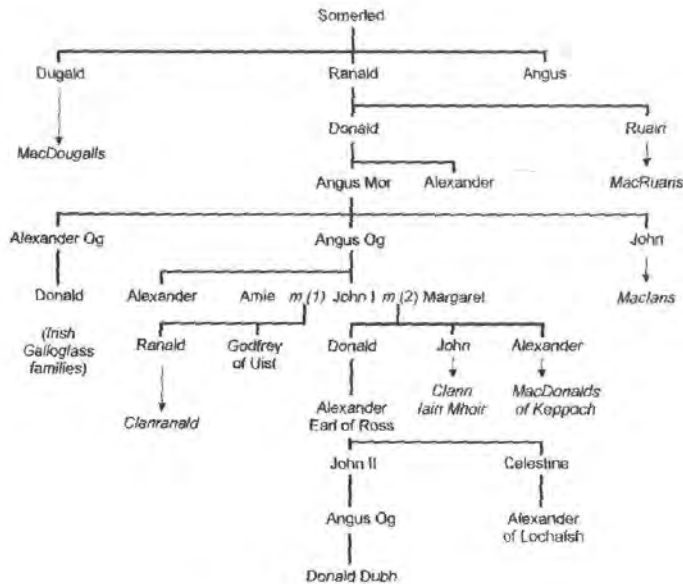


The Lords of the Isles



The MacDonalds, Lords of the Isles

King Robert I died in 1329 leaving his policy to take tighter royal control of the West Highlands and Islands unfinished. The power vacuum created by the death of West Highland leaders at the Battle of Dundalk in 1318 was now about to be filled by John of Islay, son of Angus Og. Clan Donald support for the Bruce regime must have been faltering towards the end of Robert I's reign and now there would be opportunities for the MacDonalds to consider a destiny well beyond the confines of Islay and their other lands. The story of these lords of Islay in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has to encompass a much larger world.

In the summer of 1335 John Randolph, Earl of Moray, one of the joint guardians on behalf of the young David II, was at Tarbert Castle to negotiate with John and win him back to the Bruce cause, but he failed. The following year the rival king, Edward Balliol, bought John's support through an indenture promising him the islands of Islay, Gigha, half of Jura, Colonsay, Mull, Skye and Lewis, and the lands of Kintyre, Knapdale, Morvern and Ardnamurchan. Missing from this list is Lochaber, one of the lands granted to the MacDonalds by Robert I. Balliol had to restore it to the Strathbogie family, although John was to retain it in ward until the Strathbogie heir came of age. Otherwise, Balliol's offer represented a vast increase in territorial power, spanning much of the west coast and islands of Scotland.¹

Correspondence between the English king and John in the period 1336–38, and the issue to John of English letters of safe conduct, suggest that he was a valued ally. Edward III ratified the indenture his under-king, Edward Balliol, made with John.²

John must have been aware of his own royal heritage and would have seen the opportunity he had to assume the leadership of the MacSorleys, taking the title *Ri Innse Gall* (King of the Hebrides), as he is called in Irish sources, for himself. He had already taken this step by September 1336 when he described himself in a letter to Edward III, as *Dominus Insularum*. This title in Latin is translated into English as 'Lord of the Isles', and that is how John and his successors are now known. It is also now conventional to regard John as the first Lord of the Isles, but *Dominus Insularum* was also

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an appropriate translation of the Gaelic *Ri Innse Gall*, and John and his successors were seen as of kingly or princely status in the Irish and Gaelic world. It may be of significance that he omitted this title in a letter written the same day, on the same subject, to King Edward (Balliol) of Scotland. Whereas he and his successors came to use the title regularly, the earliest surviving evidence that it was recognised by central government is in 1431 when some charters issued by John's son and successor, Donald, were confirmed under the Great Seal.³

One of the key characteristics of MacDonald lordship that demonstrates its kingly nature is the way that it encompassed other clans at the highest level. Other great Scottish magnates like the earls of Douglas, Hamilton and Argyll rose to positions of prominence with extensive landholdings, but their power was largely dependent on being head of their own kindreds and sharing the fruits of their success with their own relatives. Professionals in their service and other supporters were never treated as equals. In the Lordship of the Isles, however, other clan leaders like MacLean of Duart and MacLeod of Harris were accorded top status. This was one of the strengths of the Lordship at the height of its power in the fifteenth century. It was also one of the main reasons for its downfall under a weak lord.

Another sign of the kingly quality of the Lords of the Isles was their inauguration ceremonies. Hugh MacDonald's *History* is the earliest source for these. He inserts his account between the death of Angus Og and the succession of John, perhaps because his sources indicated that John had undergone such a ceremony. These took place at Finlaggan. There was a stone with a footprint in it – now no longer to be seen – on which the new lord stood. He was clad in a white robe and handed the symbols of his authority, a white rod and a sword. Another late-seventeenth-century description by the Skye scholar, Martin Martin, specifies that an orator (poet) rehearsed a catalogue of his ancestors. All this took place in front of a large assembly including churchmen and the nobles and the clan chiefs of the Isles, and was followed by feasting. Although these descriptions are considerably later than the events they describe they are believable, bearing comparison to the known inauguration rites of Irish kings and, of course, the kings of the Scots.⁴

The assemblies which witnessed the inaugurations were probably convened annually, perhaps at midsummer. They would have been an occasion for people from all over the Lordship to come together and show their allegiance. They were an opportunity for the transaction of business, trade, and indulging in games and sports. They were also the context for meetings of a Council of the Isles. The Dean of the Isles, Donald Monro, writing in 1549, tells us that the Council of the Isles met in the Council House on Eilean na Comhairle (the Council Island), Finlaggan, and consisted of four nobles: MacLean of Duart, MacLean of Lochbuy, MacLeod of Harris and MacLeod of Lewis; four 'thanes': MacKinnon, MacQuarrie of Ulva (?), MacNeill of Gigha and MacNeill of Barra; four

leaders of Clan Donald: MacDonald of Kinryre (Dunyvaig and the Glyns), Maclan of Ardnamurchan, Clanranald and MacDonald of Keppoch; and the Bishop of the Isles and the Abbot of Iona. This Council could be convened to offer advice to the lord wherever he was, but the meetings at Finlaggan were probably more formal, in effect a parliament constituted to give judgements and make laws. The model was the Manx Parliament, and the members of the Council of the Isles were the successors of those Hebridean delegates who had gone to the Tynwald in the Isle of Man prior to the mid twelfth century.⁵

Excavations on Eilean na Comhairle at Finlaggan have led to the identification of the Council House, a rectangular stone building, about 4.8 m by 7.5 m, built over the ruins of the earlier keep. Alongside it was a hall, perhaps the residence of a keeper or steward who looked after the place when the lord was not in residence.

The mention of thanes is of interest. Hugh MacDonald claims that John made many thanes, for the Lords of the Isles created thanes and sub-thanes at pleasure. Thane in this context is normally seen as an English translation of the Gaelic *toiseach*, the head of a kindred, but Hugh MacDonald may be indicating that these thanes were officers or coroners, local officials of the Lords of the Isles. It is known that such offices were held hereditarily by some families like the MacKays of the Rhinns of Islay. Hugh MacDonald also tells us that there was a judge in every island for settling of all controversies, and they were paid for their troubles with lands and the eleventh part of every action decided. On Islay this position was held hereditarily by a family that adopted the surname MacBrayne. The chief of the MacKinnons, based on Mull, was obliged to see weights and measures adjusted and the chief of the MacDuffies of Colonsay was the keeper of the records of the Lordship. All of this suggests that the MacDonalds had a fairly sophisticated system of administration, one appropriate for their kingly status.⁶

There were other professional families that provided clerics, poets, smiths, etc. (see Chapter 7), but the largest group of professionals by far were the warriors. The maintenance of a standing force was a characteristic of Gaelic lordship. These warriors, known in Lowland sources as caterans (Gaelic, *ceatharn*), were quartered on the local population and could extract blackmail from the surrounding areas. These were no doubt the enemies and rebels that David II had required John to expel in 1369. The MacLeans emerge in the fourteenth century from relative obscurity as a clan with a crucial military role in the Lordship. The two brothers, Hector and Lachlan, had been vassals or supporters of the MacDougalls but were given large grants of land in Mull by John, Hector receiving Lochbuie and Lachlan the lands of Duart. Lachlan seems also to have been appointed steward of John's household. A well-informed eighteenth-century genealogist of the MacLeans has it that Lachlan was made the Lord of the Isles' Lieutenant General in time of war, a position passed on to his heirs. Hugh

MacDonald's *History* records that John kept a standing force of men under the command of Hector MacLean for the defence of Lochaber and the frontiers of his lands. Lachlan was given control not just of Duart Castle but also the fortresses in the Treshnish and Garvellach Islands. From these, with a force of galleys, he could command the waters around the Mull group of islands, Loch Linnhe and the coast of Lorn. Lachlan's son and successor Hector was given the command of the right wing of the army of the Lordship at the Battle of Harlaw in 1411 and is described by John Major, writing in the early sixteenth century, as the *Campiductorem* (drill-master).⁷

The lordship that John established for himself in the Isles was consciously one of kingly status. In the troubled years from the death of Robert Bruce in 1329 to the return of his son, David II, from exile in France in 1341 he had a relatively free hand to consolidate his position. David II could hardly, however, have looked upon him with kindness. John had backed Edward Balliol and sided with King Edward II of England, and it initially appeared that he would suffer the consequences, with a royal charter of many of his lands, including Islay, being issued, soon after David's return, to Angus, son of John de Insulis. This John de Insulis was Iain Sprangach, a younger brother of Angus Og and founder of the MacIans of Ardnamurchan.⁸

An English chronicler tells us that a dispute arose in Scotland in 1342 between John [of Islay] and David, and the king had to back down in order not to imperil his hold on his kingdom.⁹ A meeting was arranged between the two parties at Ayr in June 1343, resulting in the granting to John of a charter of the islands of Islay, Gigha, Jura, Colonsay, Mull, Tiree and Coll with their small islands; Lewis; the lands of Morvern, Lochaber, Duror, Glencoe; the keepership of the adjacent castles of Cairn na Burgh More and Cairn na Burgh Beg in the Treshnish Islands, and the keepership of the castle of Dun Chonnuill in the Garvellachs. Skye and Kintyre, however, were withheld. A charter with the same date and place as John's was granted to Rnald MacRuairi of the islands of Uist, Barra, Eigg, Rum and the lands of Garmoran.¹⁰

John probably never offered any more than lukewarm support for David II. There is no evidence that he turned out to fight with the rest of the Scottish host in the campaign against the English that led to disaster and the capture of the king at Neville's Cross in 1346. Later that year he renewed his allegiance to Edward III, not as a mere subject but as an ally that could enter into a treaty.¹¹

John was intent on building up his own power base in the west and making alliances with other important families around his sphere of influence. He married Amie, the sister of Ruairi, the chief of the MacRuairis. There is a papal dispensation for this marriage dated 4 June 1337. Ruairi was murdered by the Earl of Ross in 1346 and John unexpectedly fell heir to the MacRuairi inheritance. He had already, in

1342, concluded a marriage alliance with the Earl of Ross who had been granted Skye by David II, thus taking it away from the MacDonalds.¹²

About 1350 John married, secondly, Margaret, daughter of Robert the Stewart. The Stewarts were powerful rivals of the MacDonalds in the Firth of Clyde but for much of the reign of David II neither family was in favour at court.

Meanwhile the chief of the MacDougalls returned from exile in England in the 1350s. This was John Gallda (the foreigner), and in 1354 he and the Lord of the Isles patched up their family differences. The Lord of Lorn had to recognise the Lord of the Isles' control over his family's former possessions of Mull, Tiree, the upper part of Jura and the island fortresses of Cairn na Burgh More, Cairn na Burgh Beg and Dun Chonnuill. In return for this he was rewarded with a grant of the island of Coll and the neighbouring part of Tiree, and the Lord of the Isles recognised his right to build eight ships of sixteen or twelve oars.¹³

With David II a prisoner in England from 1346 to 1357 and his father-in-law, the Stewart, acting as Lieutenant, John was again relatively free from outside interference. When the English finally agreed terms for David II's release in 1357 John, as an ally and adherent of the English king, was included in the truce between the two countries. He was also specifically excluded from having to make any contributions to David's ransom.¹⁴

Other lords with lands in the west, including Robert Stewart, the Earl of Ross, John MacDougall and Gillespie Campbell of Lochawe, were reluctant to pay taxes for the ransom but the king worked away at their resistance by a combination of bullying and offering rewards. The Lord of the Isles was a different matter, finally brought to a face-to-face meeting with David at Inverness in November 1369. Unlike their meeting at Ayr twenty-six years earlier John this time had to back down. We can only guess at the threats and the diplomatic efforts behind the scenes that persuaded John to go to Inverness in the first place and caused him to submit.

John was forced to admit that he had committed acts of negligence and he now undertook to obey royal officials and pay all the contributions and taxes that he owed. He had to expel enemies and rebels from his lands and lordship and he promised to send three hostages for his good behaviour to be warded in Dumbarton Castle – Donald his son, a grandson called Angus, and a natural son also called Donald. It is likely that David never saw any of the Lord of the Isles' money, and the death of the king in February 1371 removed any need for John to pay up.¹⁵

With the accession of Robert Stewart as King Robert II in 1371, John reaped yet more rewards. Within weeks of becoming king, his father-in-law confirmed his hold on the MacRuairi lands, and in 1376 he granted him Kintyre and part of Knapdale. The extent of John's lordship was now considerable, possibly even rivalling that of the Kingdom of the Isles under

Godred Crovan and his own ancestor Somerled. John did not have the Isle of Man or the islands in the Firth of Clyde, and it is not clear if he retained control of Lewis. It was listed with the *Earldom of Ross* when it was confirmed to the Countess Euphemia and her husband Alexander Stewart, the Earl of Buchan, in 1382. Perhaps it had been taken from John by David II as a punishment. Skye also belonged with the *Earldom of Ross* but both islands, along with areas of *Wester Ross* may have been firmly in John's sphere of influence. Possession of Lorn was to elude him. It passed to John Stewart of Innermeath when John Gallda (MacDougall) died sometime between 1371 and 1377 leaving no male heirs, and was acquired by the Earl of Argyll in 1469. He had, however, the substantial territory of Lochaber in Inverness-shire, part of the old province of Moray.¹⁶

As befits his kingly status there is evidence of the patronage exercised by John, his building works, and the flourishing of a distinctive West Highland culture. The *Book of Clanranald* records his devotion to the Church. He kept monks and priests in his company, made donations to Iona and built or restored the chapels on Orsay, at Finlaggan, both Islay, and on Eilean Mor in Loch Sween. Remarkably, a half-groat of David II or Robert II was recovered in excavations at the chapel at Finlaggan, embedded in its mortar, confirmation of this account. He also erected 'the monastery of the Holy Cross' – presumably meaning Oronsay Priory, one of the last priories or abbeys to be founded in Scotland.¹⁷

John's territories contained many castles and other dwellings, many of which were inherited from his predecessors and the MacRuairis and MacDougalls. He must have spent much of his time progressing around his estates, enjoying local renders of rent in kind, dispensing hospitality and ordering the affairs of his lordship. On Islay his main residence was at Finlaggan on the site of the earlier castle.

Although protected by the waters of Loch Finlaggan it is striking that the residential complex that developed on Eilean Mor in the fourteenth century was not defended by fortifications. It was not a castle. There was a chapel, already mentioned, with an associated burial ground, and several houses, including workshops, stores and kitchens. At the end of the island, adjacent to Eilean na Comhairle, there was an area separated off by a wall from the rest of the island, containing a hall and other buildings, probably the private quarters of the lords. The main building on the island was a great hall with a slate roof. It would have dominated the view of Finlaggan seen by visitors as they approached (Plates XV, XVI). It, rather than castle walls, was an appropriate symbol of John's status in a society that measured the greatness of its leaders by their generosity in entertaining.¹⁸

The late-fourteenth-century *Chronicle of John of Fordun* records that the Lord of the Isles had the castle of Dunyvaig and two mansions on Islay. Finlaggan was one of these mansions. The other was at Kilchoman. There is no trace of this mansion today. It is probable that it survived into the seventeenth century to be the 'choice mansion house' of the Campbell

Lairds of Islay. A report published in 1800 describes near Kilchoman 'an old, ruinous, gloomy building, which was once the seat of the turbulent Macdonald, prince of the Isles'. It was then occupied by the minister of the parish.¹⁹

On Islay and elsewhere in the West Highlands the vitality of culture in the Lordship of the Isles is evident in the many fine grave-slabs and commemorative crosses that survive from the Medieval Period. This tradition of sculpture seems to have lifted off in the time of John I Lord of the Isles. Fine examples that probably date to his lifetime include the cross at the old parish church of Kilchoman that commemorates members of the local medical family, the Macbeths or Beaton, and a small grave-slab, possibly a child's, in the chapel at Finlaggan (Plate XVII).

By the time of his death, probably in 1387, John had achieved a remarkable transformation of his family's fortunes, passing on a legacy that was to endure for over a hundred years. He is said to have died at his castle of Ardtornish on the coast of Morvern, and to have been buried with his father in St Oran's Chapel on Iona.²⁰

By his first wife, Amie MacRuairi, John had several sons, the most notable of whom were Ranald, the eponym of Clanranald, and Godfrey of Uist. By his second wife, Margaret Stewart, his sons included Donald, his successor as Lord of the Isles; John (Iain Mor), the ancestor of the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig and the Glynn, leaders of Clan Donald South; and Alexander of Lochaber, ancestor of the MacDonalds of Keppoch.

Sometime prior to 1373 John granted his son Ranald the lands he had inherited from Amie MacRuairi. According to the *Book of Clanranald*, Ranald was already ruling the lordship as Steward at the time of his elderly father's death. It is surely significant that he had a commemorative cross erected to himself at the chapel of Texa, opposite Dunyvaig Castle on Islay (Plate XVIII). Perhaps this stronghold was the main centre of his administration prior to it being given to his younger half-brother John.²¹

Nevertheless, it was Ranald himself who is said to have proclaimed Donald, his younger half-brother, Lord of the Isles in succession to John. The *Book of Clanranald* says that Ranald had invited the nobles of the Isles and his own 'brethern' to Kildonnán on the island of Eigg and there handed him the sceptre. This nomination of Donald, however, was contrary to the opinion of the men of the Isles.²² Possibly there was concern that Donald would turn away from his father's policy of building up a Gaelic kingdom in the Isles and would allow himself to be dominated by his mother's kin and Lowland culture. This was not to be the case. The law of primogeniture did not hold sway in Irish or Gaelic culture at this time and Donald must have owed his election to the fact that he was young and strong. Ranald, himself, may have been ruled out because of his age or health. He is said to have died six years after his father.²³

Links, which could reasonably have been viewed as treasonable by the Scottish government, were maintained with the English court. King

Richard II authorised the Bishop of Sodor (Man) to treat with Donald, his brother John and half-brother Godfrey in 1388, and from 1389 to 1396 John is listed as an ally of Richard II in negotiations for the truce with France and her allies, including Scotland. There was a curious sequel to the MacDonalds' relationship with Richard II a few years later. It is claimed that Richard, having been deposed and imprisoned by his successor Henry IV, managed to escape and make his way to the Isles. Here he was recognised and discovered in the kitchen of Donald Lord of the Isles by either a jester who had been trained at Richard's court, or John MacDonald's Irish wife. Donald had him sent to the Scottish court where he was treated with respect and given royal honours. He died at Stirling Castle in 1419.²⁴

The discovery of the deposed English king in Donald's kitchen – at Finlaggan? – must have been about 1401. It cannot reasonably be doubted that this Richard was an impostor. This must have been known to the MacDonalds and also to the leading figures at the Scottish court – so who was kidding whom and for what purpose? Was it a ploy by Donald and John to distract attention from the fact that in 1401 they were issued with safe conducts to go and treat with the new English king, Henry IV? It certainly suited the Scottish Governor, the Duke of Albany, to entertain this Richard and try and use him as a means of getting support from the French for war with England.²⁵

It is clear from the above that the traditional interests of the MacDonalds in Ireland were not forgotten after the succession of Donald. There were by this time several MacDonald families of Galloglass (hereditary warriors) established in that island, some of them descended from Alexander son of Angus Mor. The main player from our point of view was Donald's younger brother John, not least because he was the progenitor of a branch of the MacDonalds that were important landowners on Islay until the early seventeenth century. John was given the epithet 'great' and hence the clan that looked to him as its founder was known as Clann Iain Mhoir. It could also be referred to as the MacDonalds of Islay or Clan Donald South.

John married Margery Bisset, heiress of the Glynnns of Antrim, about 1390. The Glynnns are a substantial track of land in north-east County Antrim consisting of seven *tuatha* (countries or lordships) that were to remain with John's descendants until the eighteenth century. They gave John great power and prestige in the Isles, as well as Ireland, and put him in direct contact with the English kings Richard II and Henry IV.²⁶

John had received from his father 120 merks of land in Kintyre and 60 merks of land in Islay. These Islay lands can be identified as those extending to almost 60 merks that were included in the Barony of Bar created in 1545 for John's descendant, James MacDonald (Fig. 5.1). They included lands in Kildalton, the Oa, Kilarrow and Kilmenny. John's main residence, from which he took his territorial designation, was the castle of



Figure 4.1 Map of Lordship of the Isles and Earldom of Ross.

Dunyvaig. By the time he acquired it, the small enclosure castle of the twelfth or thirteenth century had been developed into a much larger complex with a hall-house on the rock stack jutting into the sea, fronted by a small inner, and large outer, courtyard. This outer courtyard had a sea-gate large enough for drawing in galleys.²⁷

Alexander, the younger brother of both John and Donald Lord of the Isles, is said by Hugh MacDonald to have refused his father's offer of Trotternish in Skye in favour of the Lordship of Lochaber. He expanded MacDonald power from Lochaber up the Great Glen by extortion and blackmail. An indenture of 1394 between him and Thomas Dunbar, Earl of Moray, shows how the earl had to pay Alexander a yearly fee of 80 merks as protection money for the lands of the Earldom and Bishopric of Moray. The document specifically lays down that Alexander will not burden these lands with his own men or other caterans. The indenture was for seven years, and in July 1402, presumably because it was not renewed, Alexander demonstrated the price of non-compliance by sacking the Chanonry of Elgin and burning much of the town of Elgin itself. In October of that year Alexander, having been excommunicated by the Bishop of Moray, felt compelled to return to Elgin to seek forgiveness and absolution, but he only did so at the head of a large army.²⁸

Sometime between 1395 and 1398 Alexander also took the royal castle of Urquhart. The castle overlooks Loch Ness and controlled the route from Loch Linnhe through the Great Glen to Inverness and the Moray Firth. With Urquhart Castle under their control the forces of the Lordship would have been able to sail their galleys through the lochs of the Great Glen. This acquisition, however, was seen as a step too far by the government. A general council at Perth in April 1398 agreed that a large army should be sent against Donald, Lord of the Isles, and his two brothers. The leaders of this army were to be King Robert III's brother, the Earl of Fife (also called Robert), and the heir to the throne, his son the Earl of Carrick. Fife was now made Duke of Albany and Carrick Duke of Rothesay, perhaps as a deliberate propaganda drive to stress the role of the royal family as leaders and not persecutors of the Gaels. Both titles would have been seen to locate their spheres of interest in Gaelic regions of Scotland and suggested the Gaelic roots of the dynasty. The army was gathered at Dumbarton that summer and an expedition launched against the Lordship, resulting in the submission of Donald and his imprisonment of his brother Alexander. Despite the council's wish that Urquhart Castle should revert to royal control there is no certain evidence that this happened, and Donald had released his brother without royal permission by November 1399.²⁹

Clearly the power and influence of the MacDonald brothers were not significantly curtailed by the events of 1398, and an even greater extension of MacDonald power was to come through the marriage of Donald with Mariota Leslie, sister of Alexander Earl of Ross, sometime prior to 1402

(Fig. 4.1). In that year, the earl died, leaving a daughter, Euphemia, as his heiress, but the earldom, which was the largest territorial earldom in Scotland, was claimed by Donald in right of his wife. Euphemia was supported by her grandfather, the Duke of Albany, who then governed Scotland on behalf of his brother, King Robert III. Donald may have been in effective control of much of the earldom, including its main castle of Dingwall, by 1411, when the forces of the Isles famously clashed with a royal army at Harlaw, near Inverurie in Aberdeenshire. The incitement to battle said to have been composed by a MacMhuirich bard prior to the conflict is a stirring string of exhortations for the 'children of Conn of the Hundred Battles' to be stout-hearted, vigorous and dexterous, for now was the time to win recognition.³⁰

Writing in the early sixteenth century, the historian John Major saw the battle as a struggle between the wild and the civilised Scots, and tells how as a schoolboy it was the theme of his games. It was certainly the case that Donald's army, perhaps as many as 10,000 strong, was drawn from the Highlands and Islands while the forces that opposed him were largely contingents from the north-eastern Lowlands, commanded by Alexander Stewart, Earl of Mar. Donald's precise aims are not altogether clear, though contemporaries feared that he would take control of Scotland as far south as the River Tay. His route probably took him through the Earldom of Ross, picking up support as he went, and thence he moved on to threaten Aberdeen.³¹

The battle was hard fought with many casualties, the main one on Donald's side being Hector MacLean of Duart, the chief of the MacLeans. Both armies parted at the end of the day, perhaps neither very sure which had come off better. In the immediate aftermath, Albany, at the head of another army, recaptured Dingwall Castle from the MacDonalds, and the following summer gathered three forces to attack Donald. The latter came to him at Lochgilp and offered oaths and hostages to keep the peace and provide protection for the king's subjects.³² In 1415 Albany's granddaughter Euphemia resigned the earldom and it was re-granted by Albany to his son John, Earl of Buchan. After Buchan died in 1424 it was retained by King James I.

The reality on the ground, however, was undoubtedly somewhat different, with all or most of the lands of the earldom under MacDonald sway through to John II Lord of the Isles' forfeiture in 1475. Donald's grip on earldom lands was strengthened through the support he received from the main kindreds in Wester Ross, including the MacKenzies, Mathesons and Gillanders. A rare surviving charter issued by him in 1415 records a grant to Angus MacKay of Strathnaver, the head of another important northern clan, of lands in Sutherland associated with the Earldom of Ross.³³

We mentioned above that the Bishop of Sodor was authorised by King Richard II of England to treat with Donald, his brother John and half-

brother Godfrey in 1388. The negotiations, assuming they took place, must largely have been about ecclesiastical affairs, most importantly the schism in the Church that resulted in two lines of popes from 1378. The Roman popes were supported by the kings of England, and inevitably, the rival line of Avignonese popes was supported by the Scots. The Bishop of Sodor was based in the Isle of Man, the only part of his diocese under English control, and he adhered to the Roman Pope. Another bishop, Michael, was now installed in the Scottish part of the diocese, probably choosing Snizort on Skye as his cathedral. This marked another split in the Church in the Isles conforming to political realities. The new Scottish Bishopric of the Isles also broke its links with Nidaros (Trondheim), and when the Archbishopric of St Andrews was established in 1472 it was clearly fully part of the Scottish Church.³⁴ The break away of the Church in the Isles from the control of a bishop based in Man presumably suited Donald. It would have strengthened his hold on his vast lordship.

The date of Donald's death is given in Irish sources of the seventeenth century as 1422. He may, as indicated by the Book of Clanranald, have resigned control of the lordship to his son Alexander prior to his death. This history also states that he became a monk in the monastery at Iona, but afterwards passed away on Islay. Hugh MacDonald believed he died at Ardtornish in Morvern. The Book of Clanranald also credits him with giving land in Mull and Islay to Iona Abbey.³⁵

In a Gaelic charter of 1408 relating to lands on Islay (see Chapter 7) Donald signs himself as *MacDhomnuill* (The MacDonald). This style of using the surname as a title parallels, if not anticipates, the way that Irish kings designated themselves in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Donald did not, as far as is known, adopt the title of Earl of Ross, which he may have regarded as of lesser status than *MacDhomnuill* or *Ri Innse Gall*, though other contemporary documents refer to him as lord of the earldom.³⁶ In any case, Donald may have been prepared to aim much higher than a mere earldom. His main protagonist was the Duke of Albany, by 1406 ruling Scotland on behalf of his nephew King James I, a prisoner in England. Hector MacLean of Duart had been given an English safe conduct in 1405 to go and visit James I, presumably at the behest of Donald, but whether this was because James was looking for support from Donald, or vice versa, in a potential struggle with Albany, is not apparent. Donald must, like many of his contemporaries, have doubted whether James would ever succeed to the throne. His 1411 campaign may really have been about making a bid for the Kingdom of Scotland rather than just Ross.³⁷

The Gaelic charter of 1408 is a unique survival of a type of document that might have been issued by Donald to many of the leaders of Isles society to record grants of land and other arrangements. His title, *MacDhomnuill*, appears to have been written in his own hand, and his doctor, Fergus Macbeth, also signed his own name. This is, perhaps, the

oldest known deed in Scotland with the signature of laymen. It is the earliest surviving original document issued by a Lord of the Isles. The second oldest is a charter of 1410 issued by Donald at Aros on Mull in December 1410, confirming a grant by Christina MacRuairi. It is written in competent Latin of the period.³⁸

These documents provide a tantalising glimpse of what may have been a considerable output of documents in the two languages, Gaelic and Latin. Although it appears that it was Fergus Macbeth who drew up the 1408 charter, it was probably more normal for such tasks to fall to the clergy who are noted by the Book of Clanranald as the companions of Donald, and John I before him. The Lords' chaplains may often have doubled as secretaries for such duties. The chapel at Finlaggan on Islay would have had an important role as a place where documents would have been drawn up and witnessed. The earliest surviving evidence of this is a notarial instrument of 14 June 1456, recording a decision of John II Lord of the Isles. Adjacent to the chapel the foundations of a house and byre (buildings H and J) have been discovered in excavations. These may have been occupied by the chaplain.³⁹

By the time James I was released from English captivity in 1424 Albany had been succeeded by his son Murdoch, not just to the extensive Albany estates but also to the governorship of the realm. Neither he nor his father stretched themselves to achieve the release of their royal kinsman, and it is soon as he was confident he had enough support to achieve his ends. He was able to call upon the new Lord of the Isles, Alexander, to sit on the assize that tried and condemned Murdoch and other members of his faction.⁴⁰

A desire to eliminate Albany may have been the only thing that the Lord of the Isles and his king had in common, and any rapprochement between the two was to be very short-lived. Indeed, the year after Duke Murdoch's execution the MacDonalds were supporting his son, James 'the Fat'. He had managed to escape to Ireland where he must have made contact with John of Dunyvaig and the Glynnns. It was believed that he intended to invade Scotland and make a bid for the Crown. King James at this time had no children of his own and James 'the Fat' would have been seen as his heir.⁴¹

An Act of Parliament of March 1426 forbade unauthorised contact between Ireland and those parts of Scotland adjacent to it because of the presence of the king's rebels among the Irish.⁴² Other actions by the king suggest that he was sizing up his options, if not actively planning for the downfall of the MacDonalds. These deeds included the sending of an embassy to King Eric of Denmark and Norway in 1426 to rearrange payments of the annual sum owed since 1266 for the Western Isles, thus presumably putting his overlordship of the Isles beyond any doubt. Hugh MacDonald was later to claim that Alexander refused to recognise the

sovereignty of the Kings of the Scots over his island possessions. James also showed renewed favour to the MacDonalDs' opponent at Harlaw, the Earl of Mar, bolstering his position in the north and in 1427 strengthening the royal castle of Inverness which was in that earl's keeping. The rights of Robert, a brother of Murdoch, late Duke of Albany, to the Earldom of Ross were probably bought out.⁴³ Most significant of all, there was no recognition by James of Alexander of the Isles' right to be Earl of Ross.

Whether the king was reacting to the MacDonalDs' unfriendly actions or the MacDonalDs to a hostile king cannot be known, but the two sides, while moving apart, were closing in on trouble. Alexander and his clerk, 'sir Nigel', were paid expenses by the royal treasurer in 1426, perhaps for a visit to court to resolve differences, but by 1428 there was clearly no thought of negotiation in the king's head when he invited Alexander, his mother and other leaders of northern society to come to his castle of Inverness for a parliament. There, in what can only be viewed as a breach of trust, he had them arrested and imprisoned. Apart from Alexander and the Countess of Ross, the prisoners included MacDonalD allies like the chiefs of the MacKays, the MacKenzie and the Mathiesons.⁴⁴ The MacKenzie and Mathiesons were the two most important kindreds in Wester Ross at that time.

The king clearly now sought to find a more acceptable leader among the MacDonalDs, one who would be more pliant to royal will. It appeared that John MacDonalD of Dunyvaig might be that man. He was tanist or heir to the Lord of the Isles, ambitious and experienced. What realistic hopes James had to engineer a replacement of Alexander by his uncle John is not known but his plans went disastrously wrong when the royal go-between, James Campbell, murdered John at a meeting set up to discuss such matters. The king clearly did not feel strong enough at this point to dispense with the leaders of Clan Donald altogether and was left with no effective choice but to deal with Alexander. Alexander was offered a vision of loyal service bringing rewards, and was set free in 1429. His mother remained in custody, perhaps as a guarantee of his good behaviour.⁴⁵

Whether the king understood it or not, there was little chance that Alexander would now be a good subject, even if he would have been happy with a life as a royal courtier. His position depended on his ability to lead his clansmen and there would have been no shortage of cries of revenge for the death of John MacDonalD and other royal insults. The MacDonalD response was almost immediate. Inverness was burnt and a fleet was sent to Ireland for James 'the Fat', to bring him home and have him established as king. This nightmare scenario for King James failed to materialise since the Albany heir died before being able to embark.⁴⁶ Meanwhile the king raised a large army and set off to encounter Alexander.

The two sides met in Lochaber on 23 June 1429. The MacDonalD army was apparently as strong in numbers as at Harlaw but not so resolute for the fight. The Clan Chattan (MacKintosh) and Clan Cameron supporters

of Alexander were not prepared to fight against the king in person, withdrew, and surrendered to royal authority. In the ensuing fight the MacDonalD forces were routed. The king followed up this success by taking the castles of Dingwall and Urquhart and led a new force into Argyll to root out Alexander. Castle Sween and the castle of Skipness were taken and with Kintyre and Knapdale given into the joint keeping of two Ayrshire knights, Alexander Montgomery of Ardrossan and Robert Cunningham of Kilmaurs.⁴⁷ Alexander was forced to sue for peace. He was required to make a humiliating submission at Holyrood Abbey, where, clad only in his shirt and drawers, and on his knees, he had to offer up his sword to the king. He was imprisoned in Tantallon Castle in East Lothian.⁴⁸

Even now, King James did not feel able or willing to dispose of this troubler of his peace, and the power of Clan Donald was soon to be manifest on another battlefield in Lochaber, this time at Inverlochy in September 1431. A royal army led by the earls of Mar and Caithness was routed by a much smaller force of Islesmen, Caithness himself being killed. The hero of the day for the MacDonalDs was the eighteen-year-old Donald 'Balloch' (freckled), son of the murdered John MacDonalD of Dunyvaig. He thus, in the chronicler Bower's words, 'raised his head from his lair', giving notice that he would be a power to reckon with.⁴⁹

Remarkably, King James released Alexander from captivity very shortly afterwards. Perhaps he realised that his best hope of neutralising the threat posed by Donald Balloch was to restore Alexander to his lordship and leadership of his clan. Perhaps this time Alexander also saw a threat to his own position from his cousin Donald, who would, on the strength of his victory at Inverlochy, most likely be elected by the clan leaders as Lord of the Isles should Alexander falter or die.

Alexander had by 1431 married a Lowland wife, Elizabeth Haliburton, perhaps at the instigation of the king. She was from Dirleton, near his prison in Tantallon Castle. Hugh MacDonalD believed that he took a contingent of 3,000 of his men to join the king's army at the siege of Roxburgh Castle in 1436. In his mother's lifetime he had called himself Lord of the Isles and Master of the Earldom of Ross, but by the beginning of January 1437 he had adopted the title of Earl of Ross, probably with King James's approval. The death of the Earl of Mar in 1435 would have meant that Alexander had no effective competitors as the most powerful lord in the northern parts of the kingdom. It was possibly also James who had Alexander appointed as justiciar north of the Forth, prior to his murder the following February. Alexander appears in government records from the middle of 1437 as earl, and as justiciar from the beginning of the following year.⁵⁰

The rest of his life may have been spent as a loyal servant of the Crown. He was the first head of his kindred to be so integrated with mainstream Scottish society, and the only one to play a major role in the government

and administration of the country. In the latter part of his life he was not only one of the most senior post-holders of the Crown but also one of the very few earls of adult age or any experience.

There is not much to be gleaned from documentary sources about his role as head of his kindred and administrator of the vast estates of the Lordship of the Isles and Earldom of Ross. He is known to have granted charters at Finlaggan in 1427 and 1432, and it may have been in his reign that Finlaggan reached its fullest development with a remodelled great hall and copious kitchens. He held the lands of Greenan on the coast of Ayrshire, just south of the burgh of Ayr. It is not known how or when these lands came into the possession of the MacDonalds but a foothold here would have provided useful access to the trading and manufacturing resources of Ayr and the other Ayrshire burghs. Inverness and Dingwall would have provided commercial opportunities for the lands of the Earldom of Ross.⁵¹ Such activities are not well documented, but a grave-slab of the fourteenth or fifteenth century at the church of Kilchiaran on Islay may provide a clue. Its decoration includes a barrel, and an inscription identifies its owner as John and Donald, surely two merchants.

Alexander would certainly have had some say in the proposal by his uncle, Angus Bishop of the Isles, to move the cathedral of the Isles from Snizort in Skye to 'some honest place' and to create twelve canonries and as many prebends for the clergy to serve in it. The Pope was petitioned for licence to carry this out in 1433 but there is no evidence of the plan being realised.⁵²

Alexander is said to have died at Dingwall on 8 May 1449 and to have been buried at the Chanonry of Ross – that is in the cathedral of the Diocese of Ross at Fortrose. He was succeeded as Earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles by his son John, then about fifteen years of age. John was betrothed, probably through an arrangement made by his father, to Elizabeth, daughter of James Livingston, the chamberlain and one of the most powerful men in the government during King James II's minority. A poem by Giolla Coluim that appears to date to the 1470s or '80s describes John as

... the sternest to win land that is not yet thine;
to oppose thee, thou king of Islay, great the effort!⁵³

A more accurate picture, possibly, is given by a later clan historian who claimed that John was a meek, modest man, brought up at court – a scholar more fit to be a churchman than to lead Clan Donald.⁵⁴ It was also in 1449 that James II took over personal government of his kingdom and began to turn against those that had held the reins of power in the preceding years. James Livingston was an early casualty, arrested that year and forfeited the following. This left John II Lord of the Isles stripped of powerful allies at court and denied any dowry for his new wife.

The death of Alexander of the Isles may also have had the effect of unleashing Donald Balloch. He is said to have fled to Ireland in the aftermath of his victory at Inverlochy in order to escape royal vengeance. Nothing much is heard of him from 1431 until the succession of John as Lord of the Isles but it is likely that in the intervening years he not only consolidated his family's hold in Ireland but also built upon his status in the lands of the Lordship. In 1433 he combined with the O'Neills in Ireland to inflict a series of defeats against the O'Donnells and other enemies.⁵⁵ He may already have been expanding his Scottish lordship eastwards to the island of Arran where one Ranald mac Alexander, possibly a close kinsman, was occupying royal lands in the north of the island, including Lochranza, from the 1430s onwards.⁵⁶

It was probably Donald Balloch who persuaded the young and inexperienced John II to take by force what he was denied by an unsympathetic king. In 1451 he captured the royal castles of Urquhart and Inverness and destroyed Ruthven Castle in Badenoch. According to the Auchinleck Chronicler, John claimed he had been promised the keeping of Urquhart Castle for three years by the king and he now installed his father-in-law, James Livingston, as its keeper. His motive for destroying Ruthven Castle would undoubtedly have included damaging the interests of a new regional rival, the Earl of Huntly. Ruthven was the caput of his Lordship of Lochaber. In the following year Donald Balloch led a devastating raid on royal lands in the Firth of Clyde including Inverkip on the coast of Renfrewshire and the islands of Bute, Cumbrae and Arran. The castle of Brodick was destroyed.⁵⁷

This second MacDonald raid was undertaken, at least partially, in support of the Black Douglases, all-powerful during King James's minority but now being viewed by him in a hostile manner. The Earls of Ross, Douglas and Crawford signed a bond of friendship, probably soon after the king began his personal rule.⁵⁸ This need not have been seen by the king as a hostile act. Such bonds were an important and characteristic way of nurturing friendship and avoiding misunderstandings among the Scottish nobility. James did, however, see that this bond posed a threat to himself, and perhaps he was not wrong. The refusal of the Earl of Douglas to renounce it was to lead to his murder at the king's hand in 1452.

James II achieved the extirpation of the Black Douglases before his warlike reign was cut short in 1460 by the blowing up of one of his own guns. John II remained beyond his reach and relatively quiet, and the king preferred to acquiesce to his taking of royal castles rather than have him join forces with the Douglases. There is some evidence of friction in the north between John II and the Earl of Orkney after the latter was awarded the Earldom of Caithness in 1455. The earl was a loyal and trusted supporter of James II, and the MacDonalds may have felt threatened by this development.⁵⁹ The king was more concerned to tackle Donald

Balloch, and there is evidence for a royal expedition to the Firth of Clyde in 1457 or 1458, probably to reclaim Arran. About the same time Colin Campbell of Lochawe was created Earl of Argyll. There can be no doubt that this loyal supporter of the Crown was seen as a bulwark against the MacDonalds.⁶⁰

The minority of James III appeared to provide new opportunities for the MacDonalds. John II led a delegation of senior Islesmen to the first parliament of the new reign in February 1461 but got nothing for his troubles. He was clearly unhappy with the arrangements made for the minority government and the fact that the young king was to be looked after by the Earl of Orkney. His response was a devastating raid on Orkney that summer. Meanwhile Donald Balloch appears to have taken Arran again, raided Bute and besieged the royal castle of Rothesay. An attempt was made by the government to bring John back into the fold through a meeting held on Bute with Bishop Kennedy of St Andrews, but John had another option to pursue.⁶¹

This was one of the most infamous events in the whole history of the MacDonalds, the signing of the so-called treaty of Westminster-Ardtornish. It was actually an indenture between King Edward IV of England, on the one hand, and John II, Donald Balloch and Donald's son John, on the other, by which the latter would become subjects of the English king and receive wages from him. Furthermore, they agreed that should Edward conquer Scotland with MacDonald support then John II, Donald Balloch and his son would divide Scotland north of the Clyde-Forth isthmus equally among them while the exiled Earl of Douglas would be reinstated in his lands in the southern part of the country.⁶²

Donald Balloch and his son clearly had more to gain from this than John. It is likely that Donald was the driving force, perhaps using his position as a landowner in Ireland to make the initial contacts. It was his brother Ranald along with Duncan, the Archdeacon of the Isles, who was appointed to go to England to draw up the agreement. Was this mere irresponsible opportunism, with John II being coerced by his uncle Donald Balloch, or were there deeper reasons? Given that John II felt excluded from court and government and had powerful enemies there, perhaps this was a logical approach – strike before stricken. There was no move, however, by Edward IV to conquer Scotland, nor did John gather his forces for a challenge against royal authority. Indeed, in Inverness in August 1464 John reached an accommodation with the Scottish administration, which probably covered several issues, including the activities of Donald Balloch in the Firth of Clyde and his support for his nephew, Allan MacDougall, in his bid to be head of the Clan Dougall, against the interests of the Earl of Argyll. Donald Balloch must have lost his grip on Arran by 1467 when Lord Boyd, then in control of the young King James III, had his son Thomas made Earl of Arran.⁶³

Donald Balloch's main interest after 1461 may have been in his Irish lands, but the source of much of his power – manpower and ships – remained in Scotland. As a proven war leader he must have been able to attract a following from areas beyond his personal lordship, but several of the ships he led in the great raids of 1431, 1433 and 1452 would have been from Islay. A charter of the Tenantry of Lossit in 1617 indicates that this quarter land was to provide a boat with fourteen oars (or else £10) instead of the more normal mix of produce and money. This may be a unique survival of a type of service that was placed on several lands in Islay and elsewhere in the Lordship. From a 1615 report to the Privy Council on West Highland shipping it can be deduced that the Lossit boat was a *birlinn*, each of its fourteen oars pulled by three men. Many West Highland ships of the period would have been bigger vessels known as galleys, with eighteen to twenty-four oars each. The Auchinleck Chronicle gives Donald Balloch's forces in the raid of 1452 as 100 galleys containing a total of 5,000 to 6,000 men; that is somewhere in the region of fifty to sixty men and sixteen to twenty oars per boat. The overall size of this force may indeed be reported realistically at 5,000 or 6,000 men.⁶⁴

Donald's main Scottish stronghold, Dunyvaig Castle on Islay, overlooks a sheltered bay, albeit difficult of access to those without local knowledge of the rocks that partially block its entrance. There is a boat landing, a cleared area among the rocks below the castle walls, and a sea-gate opposite it that a *birlinn* could be taken through.

It was probably no coincidence that James III became aware of the MacDonalds' agreement of 1461 with Edward IV in the aftermath of the Scottish-English Treaty of 1474. John II was summoned to answer charges of treason before Parliament in December 1475 but did not appear. Sentence of forfeiture was passed against him.⁶⁵ A determined king raised armies to hound him in the following year, empowering the MacDonalds' main rivals, including the earls of Argyll and Huntly, to join the chase. Donald Balloch, now in his sixties and perhaps within weeks of his own death, was not there to support his chief, and the latter submitted to royal authority.⁶⁶ That July he was stripped of his Earldom of Ross, Knapdale and Kintyre, the sheriffship of Inverness and the castles of Inverness and Nairn. He was allowed to keep Islay and all the other island territories he held before forfeiture, Morvern, Garmoran, the Lordship of Lochaber, lands of Duror and Glencoe, the lands of Greenan in Ayrshire and the lands of Kingedward in Aberdeenshire. To add insult to injury, he was created a lord of parliament as Lord of the Isles, a status that equated in no way to that he and his forebears had enjoyed as Lord of the Isles. Although the title was the same, his peers would have been in no doubt of the change.⁶⁷

This humiliation of their clan chief evidently precipitated schisms among the MacDonald chiefs and other leaders of West Highland society. John continued to command the support of clan chiefs like MacLean of

Duart, MacLeod of Harris and MacNeill of Barra, perhaps because he rewarded them generously. Some of the MacDonald chiefs, however, looked to John's son, Angus Og, for leadership. Angus Og, born of a concubine rather than John's estranged wife, Elizabeth Livingston, had effectively been recognised as John's heir in the royal charter rescinding his forfeiture.⁶⁸ He was clearly made of sterner material than his father. Indeed one of the charges against his father in Parliament in 1475 was that he had usurped royal authority by appointing his bastard son as his lieutenant. Hugh MacDonald's history suggests that Alexander Og chased his father out of Islay. This may partially explain the liferent of lands in Kintyre given to John by King James III in 1481, perhaps in compensation, and as an attempt to bolster the authority of the pliant father against the unreasonable – from the king's viewpoint – son. Another reason was the effort John made in 1481 to capture the envoy sent by King Edward IV of England to encourage Donald Balloch's son and heir, John, to rebel against the King of Scots.⁶⁹

A note in the Exchequer Rolls indicates that Arran had been devastated by the Islesmen about 1476, probably in a raid by Angus Og, also mentioned by Hugh MacDonald. Angus Og was not for giving up the Earldom of Ross without a fight. The king's uncle, John, Earl of Atholl, was rewarded in 1481 for his part in suppressing the rebellion of the Lord of the Isles, and Hugh MacDonald describes how Angus Og defeated an army led by Atholl at Logiebraid in Ross. It is not clear if Angus Og was campaigning in Ross in 1480–81 or whether Logiebraid took place in 1476 when King James III had mobilised considerable forces to bring down Angus's father. Atholl may have been taken prisoner by Angus and imprisoned for a spell on Islay. Whatever the case, as James III's authority disintegrated from 1482, leading to civil war and his murder in 1488, it is probable that Angus Og retained some control of the earldom.⁷⁰

Continuing enmity between John II and Angus Og resulted in a naval engagement between father and son – 'the Battle of Bloody Bay' – fought near Tobermory, Mull, perhaps in 1484. John II and his supporters came off worse. Wider hostilities are suggested by a claim in 1542 that MacLean of Duart deeds to their lands in Islay had been destroyed at a time of deadly feud by Angus Og.⁷¹

A charter of November 1485 by Angus, described as Master of the Isles and Lord of Trotternish (in Skye) specifically states that it was granted with consent of his father and council. This is perhaps not so much an indication of rapprochement between father and son but the subservience of the former to the latter.⁷²

Angus Og met his death in Inverness in 1490. This 'Islay's king of festive goblets' is said to have been murdered in his sleep by his Irish harper, Diarmid O'Cairbre. The Book of Clanranald says that Angus was entertaining the men of the North in Inverness. Possibly the murder, as inferred by Hugh MacDonald, was the result of hostility between Angus

and the MacKenzies.⁷³ That Angus should have been with the men of the North in Inverness at this time suggests that he retained considerable authority in Ross and the Great Glen, presumably a large part of the reason he was killed. The Exchequer Rolls indicate that large areas of Ross were waste in 1485 and 1486, perhaps as a result of Angus Og's activities in expanding his power in the region.⁷⁴

Angus had been married to a daughter of Colin Campbell, the Earl of Argyll, and had a baby son, Donald Dubh. There was no question of leadership of Clan Donald going at this time to this child or reverting to John II. In any case, it appears that Donald Dubh was taken at this time by his mother to live with her father's family.⁷⁵ Instead, Alexander MacDonald of Lochalsh, John II's nephew, emerged as the new Clan Donald strongman. He was described in Irish sources as John II's deputy.⁷⁶ Alexander mounted a devastating raid into Ross in the early 1490s at the head of a coalition of clans including the MacDonalds of Clanranald, Camerons, Macintoshes and the Roses of Kilravock, partially aimed at strengthening the MacDonald grip on the earldom and at taking revenge on the MacKenzies. Inverness and its castle were destroyed. This was no doubt the main reason for the final forfeiture of John II in 1493. Although he may not have sanctioned the raid, and probably had little influence on his clan, he was held personally responsible. He became a pensioner at the court of James IV, dying in Dundee in 1503.⁷⁷

King James IV was determined that there would never again be a Lordship of the Isles to challenge him or his successors, or cause disturbances in the West. In the summer and autumn of 1493 he went to Argyll to receive the submission of many of the leaders of Isles' society. They were given crown charters of those lands they had held of the Lord of the Isles, and Alexander of Lochalsh, far from being punished for his raiding in Ross, was knighted. So was John Mor of Dunyvaig and the Glynns, son of Donald Balloch. The creation of these two Islesmen as knights was more than a sign of royal favour. It was an attempt to establish a personal relationship with them, to instil in them some of the values and status of this dignity as long understood in courtly circles.⁷⁸ In 1494 King James returned to the West and proceeded to build a new castle at Tarbert, guarding the narrow isthmus between Kintyre and Knapdale, where boats could be taken across from West Loch Tarbert to the Firth of Clyde. He also put a garrison in Dunaverty Castle at the south end of Kintyre.

Clearly this royal interest in Kintyre, long dominated by the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig, was most unwelcome to the then chief, John Mor, who had lost title to them, but presumably not possession, by the first forfeiture of John II in 1475. He is said in a late and unreliable source to have stormed the castle in 1494 and hanged its royal governor from the walls within sight of the king as he passed in his fleet. Certainly, he was summoned that September to answer a charge of alleged treason in Kintyre.⁷⁹

Whatever the truth of this colourful tale, it seems from later events that John Mor broke with King James – or rather the king with John Mor – soon after he was knighted in 1494. The *Annals of Ulster* identified him as 'King of Inse Gall' (Lord of the Isles) and it may have been his assumption of this title, or election to it by the leaders of Clan Donald, that brought royal opprobrium. As noted above, only a role of deputy to John II had been claimed by Alexander of Lochalsh. The leaders of Clan Donald may now have agreed to depose John II. About the same time, Alexander of Lochalsh was murdered on Oronsay, possibly by John Mor's son, John Cathanach and John Maclan of Ardnamurchan.⁸⁰

The MacIans of Ardnamurchan, with their main stronghold at Mingary on the Sound of Mull, were a senior branch of Clan Donald descended from Angus Mor, Lord of Islay in the thirteenth century. They also had a foothold on Islay, lands granted them by Alexander Lord of the Isles, and were baillies of Islay, at least from the time of John II, probably with their main residence on Islay on the crannog of Eilean Mhurreill in Loch Finlaggan, within site of the lordly residence on Eilean Mor. That John Maclan should have been allied with the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig is not surprising. What is, is that a few years later he turned against his own kinsmen, perhaps after pressure from James IV when the latter visited Mingary on another expedition to the Isles in 1495.⁸¹

In 1499 the king granted a charter to Maclan at Tarbert Castle as a reward for capturing Sir John, his son John Cathanach and their accomplices, and also for handing over the lands of mid Kintyre with the office of steward. The *Annals of Ulster* record that in 1499 John Mor, King of the Isles, his son John Cathanach and two others were hanged by James IV. From the Book of Clanranald and Hugh MacDonald's *History* we learn that John Cathanach and two or three sons were treacherously taken prisoner on the island of Finlaggan and taken to Edinburgh where they were executed. Perhaps Sir John was captured in different circumstances than John Cathanach. There may be a clue in the Maclan charter of 1499 in the requirement for Maclan to give up the lands of Mid Kintyre. He could have acquired these, along with Sir John, as a result of a military campaign through the MacDonald of Dunyvaig territories in that peninsula.⁸²

The capture of the MacDonalds at Finlaggan by treachery is intriguing. Archaeological excavations have demonstrated that at that time neither Eilean Mor nor Eilean na Comhairle was fortified. They were not properties that had belonged to the Dunyvaig family, they and the neighbouring land of Portaneilean to which they were attached almost certainly being demesne land retained by the Lords of the Isles for themselves. Perhaps, however, the MacDonald chiefs, including Maclan, were there for a council meeting when Maclan struck. The archaeological evidence also suggests that at some time about the end of the fifteenth century there were dramatic changes on Eilean Mor, with the great hall

and other buildings being dismantled and replaced by the more humble houses and barns of a farming township. It is possible that Maclan had instructions from his royal master to destroy Finlaggan, to prevent it ever again being the administrative and ceremonial centre of a Gaelic Lordship of the Isles.

The thoroughness of King James's efforts to eliminate any future threats from the Isles is suggested by the creation of a line of defences on the Kintyre peninsula protecting the Lowlands. Apart from Dunaverry and Tarbert there was Killerran Castle erected by James at the site of the future burgh of Campbeltown about 1498; Airds Castle at Carradale, granted in 1498 to an Ayrshire laird, Sir Adam Reid; Saddell Castle, erected about 1508–12 by David Hamilton, Bishop of Argyll, a loyal supporter of the king; and Skipness Castle, a MacDonald stronghold granted in 1493 to Sir Duncan Forrester, an officer of the royal household. Castle Sween in Knapdale was already in the hands of the Earl of Argyll, as was the royal castle at Dunoon in Cowal. Argyll also had another stronghold at Carrick on Loch Goil.⁸³

Maclan, as James IV's trusted agent in the West, built up a considerable landholding in Islay, largely at the expense of the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig (Fig. 4.2). A royal confirmation of 1505 shows he had been granted Dunyvaig Castle itself. Information extracted from the grants to Maclan and the Islay rental of 1507 indicates that he held land there with an extent of £130 at a time when the total for the lands on the island listed in the rentals was computed at £212 5s 4d.⁸⁴ These £130 lands undoubtedly included the 60 merk (£40) lands that had been granted to the founder of the house of Dunyvaig in the fourteenth century.

In June 1506 Maclan submitted an account of the rents of the island to the king's commissioners at Dunadd in mainland Argyll. A large part of the meeting appears to have been taken up with defusing possible conflict over land between Maclan and Lachlan MacLean of Duart, another major Islay landholder.⁸⁵

Lachlan MacLean's father, Hector, had been one of the followers of John II at the Battle of Bloody Bay and may have been rewarded with lands on Islay for his support. In 1542 Lachlan's son Hector persuaded King James V to grant him lands on Islay, with an extent of over £20, on the basis that they had belonged to his grandfather but that the documents to prove this had been destroyed in the time of deadly feud with Angus Og. These lands were in three groups, in geographical terms. Firstly, there were lands in the Rhinns, including Coull, Sunderland and Foreland. By 1540 there was a castle in Loch Gorm that belonged with the land of Sunderland, and this island may have been the main MacLean residence on Islay in the time of the Lordship of the Isles. Secondly, there were lands on the east side of Loch Gruinart and along the north coast of the island, including Corsapol, Killinallan and Bolsa. And thirdly, there were lands in the glen up the middle of the island, including Daill, Robolls, Kepolls and

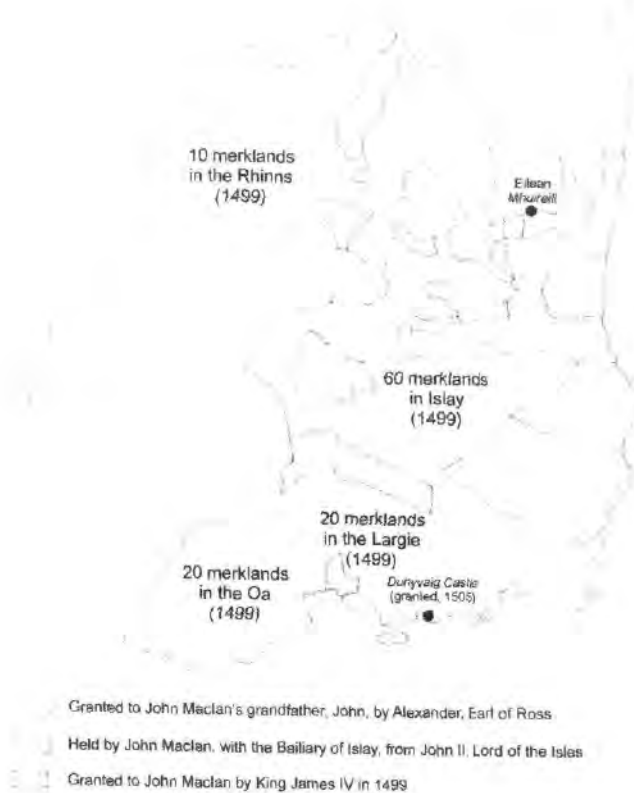


Figure 4.2 John MacIain's Islay lands, using MacDougall's map as a template.

Scanistle. The last three were included among the lands granted by James IV to John MacIain, and were no doubt the cause of the MacIain/MacLean squabbling in 1506. While the MacLeans certainly had a considerable presence on Islay in the later sixteenth century it is not clear how successful they were in preserving what they regarded as their rights before then in the face of MacIain opposition. Lachlan was in trouble with the government in 1516 and 1517 for uplifting the king's rents in Islay and elsewhere, a clear indication that he was then trying to establish or maintain his rights to lands on the island by force.⁸⁶

Lachlan was given a charter by James IV in 1496 of lands in Mull, Tiree, Jura, Knapdale, Lochaber and elsewhere, which he had held hereditarily, all then to be incorporated in a free barony to be known as the Barony of Duart. Included in these lands was Torlissay on Islay, which then gets listed in all succeeding grants of the Barony of Duart down to the seventeenth century. Torlissay has never been satisfactorily identified and it can not be credited that the MacLeans had possession of it throughout the sixteenth century. One possibility is that it was a regional name for some or all of the lands held by the MacLeans on Islay in the fifteenth century, but if so, they must have forgotten this by the late sixteenth century.⁸⁷

The MacNeills of Gigha, who were constables of Castle Sween in Knapdale on behalf of the Lords of the Isles, also held lands in Islay in the time of the Lordship. These were the five-merk land estate in Kildalton parish of Knockrinsey and other neighbouring lands. They had belonged to Malcolm MacNeill who died c.1494, but it appears that his heir, Torquil, did not gain entry to his father's lands until several years later.⁸⁸ The Knockrinsey estate must be included in a holding of twenty-merk lands, along with MacDonald lands about Dunyvaig, listed in the 1507 rental as the land of Largie.

The 1506 Islay rental lists the relatively modest holdings of eight local gentlemen and officials (of which more in Chapter 7), including a Hugh MacKay, identifiable as the Coroner of the Rhinns, and 'Gilcristo McVaig, surrigico', the then head of the Macbeths of Ballinaby. 'Angusio filio Angusii' (Angus the son of Angus), with a holding of ten-merk lands, cannot be identified. It is just possible that he was a descendant of the Brian Vicar MacKay granted lands in perpetuity in 1408, still holding on to some of them. That estate appears in the 1507 rental as the twenty-merk lands of the Oa and the ten-merk lands of Kintra.

The 1507 rental also lists £42 5s of church lands, many being recognisable as the possessions of Iona Abbey listed in the papal letter of 1203 discussed above. The island dwelling in Loch Lossit, now known as Eilean Mhic Iain (MacIain's Island), may have been the administrative headquarters of these lands in Islay. The 33s 4d land of Kilmeny is known from other sources to have belonged to the Bishop of the Isles. It is described in 1580 as a grange, and the medieval chapel, of which there are

fragmentary remains, would have served the bishop's tenants. The bishop also had land at Innerloskin, a now-lost name, but perhaps the chapel site at Laggan was part of it.⁸⁹ Two chapels are specifically mentioned with the *lands provided for the support of their chaplains: the chapel of St Columba* (Keills) with the 33s 4d lands of Knocklearoch and Baloshin; and the chapel of Finlaggan with the 33s 4d land of Ballachlaven. These generous provisions probably result from the chaplains of both places being in the service of the Lords of the Isles. The chapel at Keills, on architectural grounds, is of about the same date as that at Finlaggan. The island of Texa, dedicated to Our Lady, had lands on that island as well as on Islay to the value of 41s 8d. There are the ruins of a chapel on Texa that must have served the lords of nearby Dunyvaig Castle. It appears to be of similar date to the chapels of Finlaggan and Orsay. Lands belonging to the priory of *Oronsay are identified including Sandak (Sanaig?) and 'Superior' (Over) Sandak, and Gruinart, with a total extent of 48s 4d.*

The 'cella' of St Columba of 'Arrobollis' (Nerabus, in the Rhinns) is included with a value of £4 3s 4d. The use of the word 'cella' indicates that this was the daughter-house of a monastic establishment, known from other sources to have been the Augustinian Abbey of Derry in Northern Ireland. Nerabus was due to pay yearly sixty ells of cloth – white, black and grey – or 8d for each ell. This provides a clue that the Augustinians ran Nerabus as a sheep farm. There are the foundations at Nerabus graveyard of what may have been a substantial medieval chapel or grange with another building alongside.⁹⁰

By the end of the fifteenth century Islay was clearly well provided with churches. Apart from the three parish churches of Kildalton, Kilarrow and Kilchoman there were chapels on Orsay, Nave Island and Texa, and others at Finlaggan, Keills, Nerabus and Laggan. The substantial churches at Kilmington, Kilchiaran and probably Kilmenny, might have served as alternative parish churches for the parishes of Kildalton, Kilchoman and Kilarrow respectively. The relatively large church on the Abbey of Iona's estates at Kilnave would have been used by more than the abbey's tenants.⁹¹

None of the parish churches of Islay were appropriated to religious houses, but Kilarrow and Kilchoman remained in the patronage of the Lords of the Isles while Kildalton was in the patronage of the bishops of the Isles. The clergy were mostly local men, sometimes son succeeding father. As elsewhere, the clergy often held more than one benefice, an apt excuse here being their low value. Kilchoman had a vicar for the cure of its souls, meaning that the bulk of the teinds could be appropriated to support a parson, presumably an absentee. In 1428 Angus Bishop of the Isles successfully petitioned the Pope to hold it in commend (that is along with his bishopric) because of his poverty. Angus was a son of Donald, Lord of the Isles.⁹²

Apart from the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig, the MacLans of Ardnamurchan, the MacLeans of Duart, the Church and the other landowners

mentioned above, the rest of Islay in the years before John II's forfeiture in 1493 may have been held by John himself, or usurped by his son Angus Og. Some land would have been held in demesne, directly for the Lord's support when residing at Kilchoman or Finlaggan. Beyond Islay there were other extensive lands in the Lordship retained by the Lords, and castles, including Ardtornish in Morvern and Aros in Mull. Prior to 1475 there was Skipness Castle in Kintyre, Dingwall Castle, which was the caput of the Earldom of Ross, and, at times, the castle of Inverness, and Urquhart Castle on the shores of Loch Ness. This was a rich heritage, which the Islesmen clearly believed should, and would, be enjoyed by a new Lord of the Isles.