

## THE MCDONALDS OF BRAEMAR

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The question of how and when folk bearing Highland clan names came to Deeside is intriguing. In the absence of evidence of mass immigration, I have suggested that the answer to the question can be found in a multiplicity of family histories; which you might think is no answer at all. In previous articles (Macdonald, February and March 2015), I described the histories of two John McDonalds each of whom moved to Deeside in Victorian times, joining the Royal Household at Balmoral. Here I am concerned with the McDonalds of Braemar, the most highland part of Deeside, but nevertheless a long way from their ancestral lands.

Braemar began as a Pictish community. In medieval times, as Kindrochit, it was situated on the banks of the Waters of Clunie some way above the confluence with the Dee. The village which grew on the west of the Clunie was Auchendryne and on the east, there was Castleton. An altitude of 300 m, a tendency for floods, and soils largely derived from glacial boulder clay created a valley floor of modest fertility. Most of the land was covered by the Caledonian pine forest. The region was the Earldom of Mar, favoured as a royal hunting forest, and in the 11th century King Malcolm III used Kindrochit Castle as a base. Its recently restored ruins can be seen today opposite the main public carpark in Braemar. Also, in medieval times despite the poor conditions in Glen Lui for example, numerous shielings and townships were established to the west of Braemar. Present-day walkers, with sights set on the distant high-tops, may be unaware of them. In the 18th and early 19th century some sheep farming was developed but in Victorian times the region reverted to hunting, on the Mar estate now by shooting. Benefitting from that fashion Auchendryne and Castleton, now Braemar, grew from a meagre village to a grander place, able to service its hinterland, the transport routes and its visitors. Here Braemar is used as in the Braes of Mar, the village and its surroundings.

The Mar Lodge estate, in the ownership of the National Trust for Scotland since 1995, derived from a small part of the Earldom of Mar. A principal player in its history was William Duff, an ambitious businessman. When the Earl of Mar forfeited his estate as punishment for initiating the 1715 Jacobite uprising in Braemar, Duff was able to acquire it from intermediary owners. The main acquisition was the big house of Dalmore, which was ruined in the Muckle Spate of 1829. Agricultural improvements and serious land management ensued. Duff purchased Irish titles, becoming the Earl of Fife in 1759. Subsequent descendants also prospered, and in 1889 the 6th Earl married Princess Louise, the daughter of the future King Edward VII and became the Duke of Fife. The long-established Farquharson family were the other main land-owners in the region and remain so today. Auchendryne, with the Duke of Fife Hotel, and Castleton, with its Invercauld Arms Hotel, reflect this history.

In 1755 the population of the parish of Braemar was 1,227 - mostly Gaelic speaking, according to the Statistical Account of Scotland, Volume XIV. The idea that Braemar was well populated by McDonalds is borne out by a stroll through the kirkyard of St. Andrew's and more quantitatively by the 1851 census records. They show the population was, in round figures, 1,750 of whom 80 were named McDonald. The 1851 census was the first to record the place of birth, and so we know that 17 of the 80 were born outwith the parish. These data also demonstrate that the majority of Braemar McDonalds were well established in mid-Victorian times.

In Glengairn, about 20 miles east of Braemar, there existed a McDonald lairdship at Rineaten. There was a mansion house, but the only remaining building is a strange burial ground, the "Aisle", a walled enclosure, hidden among trees on the slopes of Cnoc Chalmac. The tomb-stones are inscribed and date from the 18th century. The relationship between the mysterious Rineaten McDonalds and those of Braemar is unknown.

Returning to Braemar in 1851, of the 17 McDonald incomers some were temporary visitors. For example, a retired tailor Malcolm

McGregor ran a boarding house at 18 Auchendryne. Living with him were his wife and two grown-up children and seven lodgers. Three of these were masons from Kirkmichael, Banffshire, doubtless working in the area, and one of the three was a Robert McDonald. Similarly, Donald Dingwall the miller at Inverey also took in lodgers. Three were described as travelling paupers. One was Jean White (56) born in Fife and the other two were children, William McDonald (5) born in Inverness and Charlotte McDonald (2) born in Perth. These intriguing examples reveal something of the mobility of people at the time but not the movement of highland clan folk from the west.

The incomer who attracted my interest most in the 1851 census returns was Alexander McDonald, a gamekeeper living with his wife and children at the Bridge of Lui. The census records that he was born in Inverness-shire, but the 1861 and 1871 censuses cite "Glencoe, Argyleshire" (sic). It is probable that his baptism was recorded at Kilmallie on the 7th of August 1814 and that his father was Donald and his mother Catherine Kennedy. Alexander moved to the Braemar area before 1842, as that year, while living at Mar Lodge, he married Janet Watson from Rothiemurchus. They raised eight children, including two sets of twins. In 1861 seven children were at home; Charlotte (17), Ronald (15), Mary (11), Ewen (8), Ann (5), Jane and Jessie, 2-month-old twins. Mary's twin brother William, listed in the previous census, was not recorded. Alexander died in 1877 at the age of 63 and is buried in St. Andrew's Kirkyard where his gravestone is inscribed "Alester McDonald". (For those interested in variations encountered from translating Gaelic names into English he is also recorded as Alister in his death certificate and the 1871 census and as Alexander in other records). His wife Janet, who died in 1897 at Claybokie Lodge, is also buried there. Their twin daughters Jane and Jessie are also commemorated. Both died young, Jane at the age of 29, in London, and Jessie at the age of 31. Their eldest daughter, Charlotte, is also mentioned.

Ann, and her sister Jessie, were servants at the Fife Arms Hotel in Auchendryne in 1881. I have been unable to find more about Ann, Jane

or the twins Mary and William, but Jessie's life is well documented. In 1891 she married William Forbes, a mason from Glenmuick and within eighteen months she died of septicaemia.

Ewen became a gamekeeper and, remarkably, married Ellen Fletcher from Hackney, London. I wish I knew the story behind this event, but the official record is that the ceremony took place on 23 December 1875 at St. John's, Hoxton, Hackney. Ewen was described as a gamekeeper from Invercauld and Ellen as a spinster. In 1881 they were living at Inverey with two children, Ellen (3) and Edith (1), although earlier, in 1879, they had lost a baby girl, Jessie Ann. Two sons were born, William in 1883 and Ewen in 1884. In 1901 Ewen, the father, was still a gamekeeper at Inverey, living with his wife, daughter Edith and two sons. Daughter Ellen had left home. The 1911 census records that the elder Ewen, now 58, a Gaelic speaker and gamekeeper, was still at Inverey with Ellen. Their granddaughter Francis Edith McHardy (4) was living with them. She was the daughter of Edith who married Donald McHardy in 1906. Also, by 1911 Ewen (the younger) had moved south and was a chauffeur to the Delderfield family of Little Bush Farm, Kingsbury, Hendon (London). A gravestone in St. Andrew's Kirkyard records the death of the elder Ewen in 1912, at Inverey Cottage, and that of his wife Ellen at Cults in 1943, in her 93rd year. It also records that their son William "gave his life for his country in France in 1916" (see photograph on following page).

Ronald, also a gamekeeper, married Mary Thomson from the Post Office at Crathie, in 1873. He was 28 and she was 42. He had previously lived with his unmarried sister Charlotte at Lui Beg Cottage. The 1881 census records Ronald, now 35, living at Claybokie with Maggie Smith (18), a servant, whilst his wife Mary (49) is recorded at the Post Office, Crathie, still living with her mother and father. She was still at the Post Office in 1891, married, and a housekeeper living with her brother, who was now the postmaster, and her widowed mother. The same census shows that Ronald was at Claybokie, a head gamekeeper living with his widowed mother and his sister Jessie (who married later that year) and two servants.

The gravestones of three gamekeepers in St. Andrew's Kirkyard, Braemar, commemorating, from left to right, Alexander McDonald and his family, his younger son Ewen and his family, and his elder son Ronald.



Alister Macdonald

Ronald continued to live at Claybokie. His mother died in 1897 and the 1901 census shows that his elder sister Charlotte had rejoined him, and additionally in the household there was a niece, Jane McDonald (10), born in England in 1890. Also, in 1901, the census shows that Ronald's wife Mary was still living at the Crathie Post Office with her brother Albert, now head of the household. She died on October 1st, at the age of 70. In 1911 Ronald (65), Charlotte (67) and niece Jane (20) were living at Mar Lodge. Ronald and his sister were recorded as speaking both Gaelic and English whereas for Jane there was no entry. This is curious for reasons which will become apparent.

Jane was born in England in the same year as Jean Bain, (née McDonald), also born in England, who became a well-known personality in Deeside history. In those days the names Jean and Jane were interchangeable and as they were both the niece of Ronald McDonald (the exact family connection being obscure) I think there is no doubt that they are the same person. I have discussed this with Ian Murray whose book (Murray, 1999) describes aspects of Jean's life. Watson and Allan's excellent account (Watson and Allan, 1986) also includes important information about her. She was born in London (not just England) in 1890, and her mother (also Jean) died in childbirth. She was cared for by relatives and then moved to Inverey, to the care of an uncle and an English aunt, who must be, Ewen and Ellen McDonald. At the age of eight she went to live with her other uncle, Ronald, and was presumably mostly in the care of his sister Charlotte. Murray's book contains photographs of Ronald and one "with his wife Charlotte", presumably his sister. After the death of Ronald and Charlotte (in 1921 and 1924 respectively) Jean became a relief school teacher and in 1928 she married William Bain in Braemar. They farmed in Glen Gairn and then at Ardoch above Crathie and raised two sons. Jean died in Aboyne hospital in 1984.

According to Watson and Allan, Jean (McDonald) Bain had the distinction of being the last natural Gaelic speaker in Deeside, having learned the language as a child, although born in England. She learned the language largely at home where Ronald and Charlotte only spoke Gaelic and acquired the Deeside dialect. This came to the attention of Watson and Allan who recorded their interviews with Jean in the 1970s. Their article discusses linguistic points of interest.

What are we to make of Alexander McDonald's move to Deeside? It was a success. He established himself and his family in a service economy familiar to us today. Two sons, Ewen and Ronald, became notable head gamekeepers, and their gravestones, along with that of their father, stand together in the St. Andrew's Kirkyard. The extended family experienced both orderly progress and the sort of problems which beset many families, but, as ever, the dry records are limited. We

must imagine how the individuals felt and coped, unless we are lucky enough to come across some of their descendants, in which case we might learn more.

### ***References***

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