

ARGYLSHIRE

A Contribution to Argylishire History, Being a Monograph Sketch of the SWEYNES OF SKIPNESS and the MACTAVISHES OF DUN-ARDRIGH, KNAPDALE, AND ELSEWHERE, their Ancestors, and descendants

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Edited and Footnoted by Patricia Adams©
March 1, 2001

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Chapter III

While "Dufgall the son of Syfyn" had been thus seeking to secure for himself, his wives, ancestors and descendants, the blessings of spiritual salvation, storm clouds were gathering over hapless Argyll. Hace, the Norwegian King, with an immense fleet, had taken possession of the Western Isles and announced his intention of annexing Scotland to his dominions, "for the better protection of his subjects living in that land"- Kings and Governments being seldom at a loss for justification for their actions, when seeking to add to their own the territories of some less powerful neighbour. The Scottish King, Alexander the Third, called on those who adhered to his Sceptre, especially to the clans of Kyntyr, to come to his aid, when at the Battle of Largs in 1263 A.D. Hace was completely routed and his ambitious projects defeated. By that repulse, a formidable foe to the Scottish Monarchy was crushed forever, and the independence of the land from the rovers of Norway established. Alexander at once took possession of the Western Islands which since that period have been an integral part of Scottish territory.

The presence of Hace on the eastern side of Kyntyr would doubtless cause no little alarm to the peaceful residents in that locality, and we can easily suppose that Dufgall would have his men gathered around Skipness, while the Keepers on its battlements would be watchful day and night. When at last came the fateful message of the overthrow of the invaders, Dufgall might feel as if the special mission of Skipness were at an end and that now, his post would henceforth be on the western, rather than on the eastern side of his ancestral lands.

After that defeat the east coast of Kyntyr no longer called for military fortresses, and hence Skipinche, Saddell, and others, drop out of sight as such, on the other hand as there was constant danger of invasion and attack from Ireland, Sweyne Castle now became an important factor in the National safety. Not so large as Skipness, it yet had accommodation for a large body of men who, in case Scandinavian or other rovers should visit that locality, might provide for its protection. Doubtless other considerations must have led Dufgall to part with Skipness, but this military question was unquestionably borne in mind, for he distinctly stipulated in order that the King and Kingdom should suffer no loss, that the new owner should provide a certain military force to be always at the service of the King. This having been agreed

to, Dufgall, the son of Syfyn, Sweyne de Ergadia, Sweyne Rudh, Sweyne the Ruddy- probably from a red bearded face, Thane of Argyll¹ and Glasserie, along with his son, John de Sweyne, left the old Dalriadic Castle of Skipness, and entered on the occupancy of Sweyne Castle of which however, their ownership was after all to be but brief.

Twenty years later, and we come to the period of the Disputed Succession, that is, the years between 1286 A.D. and 1292 A.D. Alexander the Third being but eight years old when his father was killed in 1249 A.D., had been placed under the regency of Comyn, Earl of Menteith, who died in 1260 A.D. just as Alexander came of age. Alexander's Queen, a daughter of Henry the Third of England, died in 1273 A.D. and as all the King's children had died before 1283 A.D., in 1284 the Scottish Parliament declared the King's granddaughter, Margaret the Maid of Norway, entitled to succeed him. Unhappily, the Maid died in 1290, when two powerful claimants for the throne appeared, John Baliol, son of Sir John Baliol of Barnard Castle, Durham by Devorgilla, daughter of Margaret, the eldest daughter of David the First, and wife to Alan, Lord of Galloway, and Robert Bruce, son of David's second daughter, Isabella, wife of the Lord of Annandale.² During the reign of King David, there had gradually arisen two parties in the Scottish Court. Many of the nobles had estates in both England and Scotland, and so some became very Scottish and others remained very English. Of the Scottish party, Walter Comyn, of Badenoch, First Earl of Menteith through his marriage with the countess of that title and whose family had originally been settlers in Northumberland, had risen to own four Earldoms and great estates. With him was John Baliol, the father of the vassal King, while in the English party were Robert Bruce, Lord of Annandale and the High Steward of Scotland. By 1262, when Alexander the Third came of age, these parties widely apart below the surface had become apparently a united body, so that the Scottish Estates placed (Chron. And Mem. Of Scotland, Vol 1, pref. 41) the decision as to the succession in the hands of Edward the First of England.³ In strict conformity to the law of succession in reference to dignities dependent on primogeniture, Edward, awarded the Crown to Baliol⁴ who was then declared King, and in 1292 A.D. duly crowned during a Parliament held at Scone.

Among the Chiefs present to do homage to their Feudal⁵ Superior was the head of the MacDugalls, Alexander of the Isles who lived at Castle Sweyne (Iona, p. 290), great grandson of Somerled and Lord of Lorn through marriage to the heiress of Lorn⁶ when as a number of less important landowners from Kyntyr were absent, Alexander was directed to secure their immediate attendance. This however he was unable to do, for though all powerful in Lorn and Knapdale, he had little power in Kyntyr. On this, the slighted Baliol confiscated the lordships or Superiorities of the whole district and formed this into three Sheriffdoms, (Skene, 204), giving to the Earl of Ross, Sheriff rights in North Ardgail or Argyll, that is, in all the islands from Rum to Lewis, along the mainland from Moidart to Glenelg: - to Alexander of Argyll⁷, Argyll proper including Lorn, with similar rights; and to James Stewart, Cowall and Kyntyr, with similar rights (Acts. Scot. Par. Vol.1.), the inhabitants of the West Highlands thus receiving new over-lords or Superiors.

Baliol however quickly revealed unfitness for his position and after incurring Edward's resentment, terminated his career by engaging in war against England, in this he was soon defeated and taken prisoner, then he retired to France where he died in 1314 A.D. Edward then sought to incorporate Scotland with England, maintaining on the Western seas a fleet under Sir Hugh Bissett, with whom was associated John de Sweyne⁸, son of Dufgall, holding the office of Captain of the Fleet.

In the Chron. And Mem. Of Scot., Vol. 12, p. 435, Oct. 1301 A.D., we find the following letter from Bissett to King Edward:-

“Your Majesty knows, that I am with the fleet⁹, and all your men, that is Angus of the Isles and John¹⁰¹¹, son of Suffne, until the Sunday before St. Michael’s day next past. We are still waiting your commands and pleasure, in the localities of Bute and Kyntyrr.”

“Wherefore we pray your Majesty, if it please you, to send us your commands to Alexander of Argyll, if you regard him as loyal to you because if he be loyal, we in these inlands will believe that you have resolved on war, and if he be not loyal to you, tell us, what we should do, that we may be able to destroy him and crush him and those who are with him.” Alexander it would appear was – like not a few of his neighbours – “on the fence”.

In the same Vol. P. 437, also dated 1301 Oct., there is a copy of the following letter from John de Sweyne to the King. (Record Office, London)

“Your Majesty knows that I am with the noble Lord, Hugh Bissett, and with your fleet, since it came to Scotland, and since you removed from the city of Glasgow to the Castle of Bothwell, (Sep. 4, 1301) and in your service, with the said Hugh Bissett, ready and willing to do your pleasure. And since your fleet resedit from Bute, I have again visied my land in Knapdale which you gave me by Letters Patent (Charters). However, John of Argyll (or Lorne, son of Alexander of Argyll) has entered into the said land with troops, assisted by John de Menthet (Menteith) who is indeed your enemy, and has hindered me from landing. Wherefore humbly and with great earnestness, I pray your Majesty, that you would write to John of Argyll, if you regard him as loyal, that he would surrender to me, the said land in Knapdale which by those letters you gave me. I await your reply and am ready and willing to do your bidding.”

What “lands” these may have been, we cannot say, possibly, he meant his family estates for whose possession he may have had a Royal Charter, such as were issued regularly by Monarch after Monarch. We cannot suppose however that John of Argyll would be much troubled at any time, as to whose side he might personally be on, provided it brought him some advantage, or about the “rights” of John de Sweyne in the matter before us, while as John de Meneith, had as feudal superior, consented to John of Argyll taking possession, the latter being in “possession”, would certainly hold the lands in accordance with the old Highland rule: “let him keep that can”. John de Sweyne it may be noticed, makes his request on the dubious supposition of Argyll’s being a friend of the King, and was soon to find that it would one day cost him dear, to have been a friend of Edward.

Robert Bruce did not long abide by the decision which placed the crown on Balliol’s brow. Seeing the throne vacant, and himself by that time the nearest heir, he resolved that though in 1306 A.D. he had sworn fealty to Edward, who in the absence of Balliol was practically King of Scotland, he would win the Scottish crown. In that year he therefore raised the standard of revolt, and on March 25, was crowned at Scone, having then to defend his claim on the battle field. Shortly afterwards, he sustained a severe defeat near Methven, at the hands of the Earl of Pembroke, who was assisted on that occasion by Alexander of Ergadia (Argyll), with whom would doubtless be associated his kinsman, John de Sweyne¹² of Knapdale. Subsequently when Bruce with some 300 men, retreated to the West, he found Alexander MacDugall, son of Dugall, and grandson of Reginald the Lord of the Isles (source of the Clan MacDougall), along with his son John of Lorn across his path at Dal-Righ, (the King’s field) near Tyndrum. Here he was again defeated, and escaped capture only by leaving his plaid with its brooch (the historic brooch of Lorn) in the hands of a personal assailant. Later, when the tide had turned in his favour, Bruce invaded Argyll in 1308 A.D. to crush the Chief of Lorn. Alexander, at the head of his MacDougalls, again opposed his advance this time at the Pass of Brander, when the military genius of Bruce gave him a decisive victory. Alexander was defeated and fled for safety to Dunstaffnage Castle. Thither Bruce followed him and having compelled his surrender, allowed him to retain his possessions

in Lorn, while the remainder of his estates were given to his younger brother, Angus Ogg (Angus of the Isles), now one of Bruce's supporters, but who in 1301 A.D. had held office in Bissett's fleet.¹³ John de Sweyne, however, either refused to be reconciled or was refused pardon by Bruce and fleeing southward, practically passes out of Scottish history, the historians of that period tracing the movement of Kings rather than records the experiences of their subjects.

So soon as Bruce possessed sufficient power, he proceeded to prevent any future appearance in Scottish history of the name of John de Sweyne, one of the Knapdale allies of Alexander Stewart of Lorn, by confiscating all his estates. These were therefore in 1310 A.D. granted by charter to John Menteith, the Recorder of the Earl of Menteith, from whom descended to his son, Sir John Menteith, Lord of Arran and Knapdale.

If Bruce were careful to reward his friends at the expense of his defeated foes, Edward the second was diligent on his part, in disposing – on paper, of the lands belonging to his triumphant enemies. Hence we read that in 1310 A.D.¹⁴ he granted to John de Sweyne, the late Captain of his fleet and the son of that Dufgall (who had granted his churches to the Monastery of Paisley), along with his brother, Terrealnanough and Murquoch “in order to render them hated forever by Menteth his enemy” and by other his enemies, in Scotland the whole lands of Knapdale, which belonged to their ancestors – provided they recovered them out of the hands of his enemies.” “Rot. Cot. Vol. 1, p. 98. Not out of keeping with this display of Kingly generosity was another action of Edward, who so late as March 12, 1314 A.D., ignoring the altered position of Bruce, gave to his valet (corresponding to the modern Lord-in-waiting), “Dungall de Gyvelstone and his heirs forever, for good service rendered to myself and my father, all Suny Macgurk's lands in Knapdale and Glenarewyle in Scotland, forfeited by the treason of John de Menteth a Scot.”¹⁵

Bruce remembering the old enmity of Alexander of Lorn and questioning his fidelity to the new order, arranged after the battle of Bannockburn for a visit to Kyntyr. His ships with wind-filled sails and placed on sledges were dragged across the narrow neck of land separating Loch Tarbet from the Soun of Jura, when he advanced against Alexander. Sir Alexander fled northward and finally took refuge in Sweyne Castle. There he was besieged but after a stout resistance, was compelled to surrender when Bruce sent him to Dundonald Castle, where he died, his estates being given to his brother, Angus Ogg (Iona 290). The Fleet of which John of Lorn (Nephew of the Red Comyn), says Skene, Highlands, p. 245, son of Alexander – father and son having changed sides, like day and night, was Admiral, was next attacked, and not only defeated, but its admiral was taken prisoner and confined at first in Dumbarton Castle, but subsequently in Loch Leven, all his estates being given to Angus Oig. With this record of the defeat of King Edward's fleet and the forfeiture of all their family estates, the Sweynes of Sweyne Castle disappear from Scottish history and in no documents that we have consulted have we met with them again.

¹ Thane was a noble next to an Earl and who held his land from the King. The title led to the word thanage, a tenure under which tenants were Crown vassals, holding the land in feu, the rent being paid not in military service but in produce or money.

² At the elaction of candidates for the Scottish throne in 1292, says Burton. Hist. Of Scotland, Vol 2, pg. 136, all who were nearest in blood to Alexander were tainted by the bar of illegitimacy, yet their advancing their claim despite this objection, shows how little in that age such was considered a bar to succession.

³ The original document addressed to King Edward and submitting the case to him signed by the Claimants of the Scottish Throne and dated at Norham June 5, 1291, is to be seen in the Museum of the Public Record Office, London. The Seal of the Count of Holland is not attached to this letter along with the others, since he was not at Norham on the day of its preparation. There is also in that building, the original letter of Baliol notifying "his liege lord" Edward 1st King of England, Sovereign

lord of Scotland, that he had sworn fealty to him on November 20, 1292, in the presence of the Bishops of St. Andrew and Glasgow, and a number of Scottish Lords whose names are given. This letter is in French.

⁴ The decision was based on the feudal principle, that "heritable succession though more remote by one degree, if descended from the eldest sister, was preferable to the nearer in degree if from the second, that is, the succession ran in the direct line not in any collateral so long as any, whether Male or Female of the direct line existed. Bruce was a grandson of David through David's second daughter Isabella. Baliot was his great grandson, but through his eldest daughter.

⁵ feu-dal - Pronunciation: 'fyü-d&l; Function: adjective; Date: 1612; 1 : of, relating to, or having the characteristics of a medieval fee; 2 : of, relating to, or suggestive of feudalism <feudal law>; - feu-dal-ly /-d&l-E/ adverb (www.webster.com)

⁶ This nobleman had married a daughter of Baliol's cousin, the Red Comyn, who in 1306 was stabbed to death at the Franciscan Church of the Minorities in Dumfries by Bruce, a murder tht accounts for the enmity of Alexander and of his son John, against him.

⁷ A somewhat unexpected entry meets us (Chron. And Mem. Of the Picts, Vol 1, p. 337) in a letter from J. Baliol dated 1296 A.D. in which "the King allows Alexander of Argyll, who frequently sends men and his own salesmen over to Ireland with goods and merchandise from himself for the purpose of selling them and of buying others, to continue from doing so." That Alexander of Argyll, a powerful Highland Chief, who was constantly involved in broils with his fellow chiefs and not unfrequently with his Sovereign himself, should at the same time be carrying on a retail trade in Ireland, strikes one as not a little grotesque. Even at this early period, the younger son of a landed man was not considered to compromise his rank by becoming a merchant, but he must be a merchant-burgess. A merchant of pure burgess blood, who had gained wealth or performed a daring act, might become a landed man – a land-lord. In the thirteenth century, a West country Chief generally resorted to a different mode of adding to his wealth, but Alexander was apparently combining two very dissimilar branches of industry, yet alas, for the romance of a highland Chieftainship! Among the articles sold by Alexander, would probably be cheese, largely produced in Kyntyr, and generally used in payment of rent for crown lands.

⁸ "John, son of Syfyn" says Sir William Fraser, Red Book of Menteith, Vol. 1, p. 438, "one of the Lords of Argyll and an ally of the English King in his expedition against the Western Isles", Records, Vol. 1, p. 438, Ed. 11, 1310

⁹ This fleet was an absolute necessary for Edward, providing provisions for his troops who were marching through lands that had been wasted without mercy.

¹⁰ SCBA, pg 13 – G.W.S. Barrow in his book *Robert Bruce*, states: ". . . the family of MacSween of Sweeney, which held the lordship of Knapdale and lands in Kintyre until 1262, when they were dislodged by the Earl of Mentieth. They nursed a grievance, and between 1301 and 1310 John MacSween was understandably active with his galleys in the English service, and still keeping alive his claims against the Mentieths."

¹¹ SCBA, pg 14 – Sir William Fraser, (*The Red Book of Mentieth*), notes: "John, son of Syfyn, one of the lords of Argyll and an ally of the English King in his expedition against the Western Isles . . ."

¹² The Sweynes were of hereditary connection with the house of Lorn which again was intimately connected by marriage with the Comyns, Alexander of Argyll having married an aunt of the Red Comyn.

¹³ Notwithstanding the services which Angus rendered to Bruce at Bannockburn where he was assigned the right of the Army, Bruce apparently began to fear that his supporter was becoming too powerful, and so he not only built or repaired the Castle of Tarbet to keep him in check, but obtained from him the resignation of his Kyntyr estates, which he then bestowed on his son-in-law, Robert Stewart, an action that led to the remark of the Marquis of Bute, that "Bruce served his country well, but himself and his relatives better". Rown's Mems. p. 184.

¹⁴ From Robinson's Index of Charters, we learn that in the Eighteenth year of his reign, that is in 1334 A.D., Roert Bruce exchanged some lands in Kincardineshire, with the Earl of Menteith for those which latter held in Knapdale while on a MSS., in the possession of Neil Malcolm Esq. Of Poltalloch and quoted in the New Statistical Acct. we are told, that in 1353 A.D., Menteith transferred those lands to the Earl of Argyll, at whose death in 1360 A.D. they reverted along with the rest of Knapdale to the Crown. This then granted them to John, Lord of the Isles, in whose family they remained until its final overthrow in 1476 A.D. when they came back to the Crown which in 1486 A.D. granted them to the Earl of Argyll. Reg. Gt. Seal Vol. 9, p. 253.

¹⁵ We do not know the locality indicated by this grant but it is curious to learn from a note in a Belfast newspaper of Jan. 8 1909, that a Belfast firm of Solicitors, having lately advertised for persons of this name, received no fewer than 130 replies. In 1451 A.D. James the 2nd, confirmed to Candida Casa (Whithorn) the gift made by Robert 1, of the Church of St. Columbkil in Kyntyrr, and of the Church of St. Michael of Gevelliston, which had been given by John de Gevelliston, son of John de Gevellikston, militis, probably descendants of Dungall de Byvelstone.