

ARGYLSHIRE

A Contribution to Argyllshire 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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Chapter IV

SWEYNE CASTLE

Our earliest mention of Sweyne Castle occurs, as we have said, in the Craignish Annals of 1220 A.D. where it is described simply as the "large house built by the predecessors of MacSween of Skipinche."¹ Evidently at the date of the Craignish marriage, Castle Sweyne was not occupied by the Sweynes as their home, so that if it existed then, it must have been planned and built for military rather than for social purposes, and apparently, as we have said, as a protection against the pillaging visits of Scandinavian or other pirates. Several castles had already been built on the Lorn shores and within a few miles of each other – such as Craignish, Duntroon, Asknish, etc. and all for some such purpose, but hitherto, there had been none in Northern or Southern Knapdale, and hence the importance of the new building. As such its value was so great, that when we read of it subsequently it is always in connection with military plans and movements. Parting with Skipness, Dufgal the son of Syfyn, accompanied by his sons John, Terrealnanogh, and Murdock, entered on the occupation of the castle, standing at the mouth of the loch which now bears his name. Ever afterwards we read only of the Sweynes of Sweyne Castle. Skipness was no longer their home, and no longer had they any right to style themselves or to be styled by the name they had so long borne. Henceforth, they were simply the Sweynes of Sweyne Castle, right of title depending on ownership or at least of occupancy.

Before 1300 A.D. Skipinche had thus passed into the hands of the Earl of Menteith – a holding much enlarged by the grant to him by King Edward in order to secure his support, apparently a very purchasable commodity, in Argyll-shire, in 1296 A.D., of all the lands in Kyntyr, previously belonging to Alexander Stewart of Argyll and of his son John, and has no longer for us any interest. The danger which had led to its erection had passed away, and it was never again to be of importance in Scottish national life. The Disputed Succession had been dealt with in a manner that had led to the election of John Balliol as Monarch of Scotland. Shortly afterwards all Menteith's Kyntyr properties including Skipinche castle given to him by Dufgall, had been restored by King Edward to John de Sweyne and his brothers. John of Lorn, however, grandson of Angus, Somerled's son, who seems to have taken possession of the property in virtue of the protection by Menteith, refused to allow John de Sweyne to

visit it, on which the latter wrote to Edward in 1310 A.D., narrating the facts and appealing to the King to sustain him. The King's reply, however, has not been preserved.

Of the history of the Sweyne family subsequent to 1310 we know nothing for certainty, but there was apparently a branch that lived in England and was in close connection with Balliol's kindred. Thus, we read that Devorgilla, mother of John Balliol, died in 1290 at Kempstone in Northumberland, when one of the witnesses at Bedford as to the amount of the rproperty was "Hugonem de Sweynem de Wottone" of Wotton in Durham, the country in which both the Balliols² and the Comyns lived. A certain John de Gevelstone – the name of the attendant of King Edward, must also have come from that neighbourhood, for a John de Gevelstone who held ward of Hotone,³ paying annually as rent, the sum of ,11.6.7d, was another of the witnesses as to Devorgilla's property.

Hotone was held by Lucia, daughter of a Robert de Sweyne.

On the final defeat of the Balliol party in Scotland, John de Sweyne may therefore have joined his Northumberland kinsmen, and merged himself in an English branch of his family.

Bruce seems to have then given Knapdale to John de Menteith, son of the Earl of Menteith. This remained the property of Menteith until 1353, when Sir John Menteith, son of the Earl of Menteith and "lord of Aerran and Cnappodol", gave all these lands to Gillespic Campbell of Lochow, while subsequently, b a Charter dated from Sweyne Castle, he gave to Archibald Earl of Argyll, the greater part of S. Knapdale including "all the penny lands in which Castle Sweyne was situated, along with others, to be holden for payment of a pair of whyt gloves at Martinmas in winter, yearly, if the same should be asked; with power to the said Archibald with his heirs to sell and dismiss theiffs as they please, and if they be condemned to death with power to hang them on a gallows."⁴ (Red Bk Of Menteith). The Scottish monarchs were accustomed to make great visitations of their kingdom occasioning no little expense to the localities visited. At a Parliament held at Ayr in 1369, it was recommended that the King and his Court go occasionally to the Highlands and burden these with the cost of entertaining and this relieve the more frequently visited districts. In furtherance of this proposal it was suggested that the King, David II, should visit Kyntyr, Knapdale and Arran, the dominion of John of Lorn, John of the Isles and Gillaspic Cambel, - districts which we are sure would have promptly declined the honor of such a visit. On Argylls death in 1360 Knapdale reverted to the Crown (Robert II) by whom it was given in 1370 A.D. to John, lord of the Isles, remaining in his family till its final overthrow in 1436. Poltalloch MSS.

About 1420 A.D. Alexander of Argyll, Lord of the Isles, granted in heritage to Torquil MacNeil, who was actual Keeper of the Castle, its constabulariate, along with certain lands in Gigha and Knapdale. (MacNeil's Charters). The administration whther of Alexander or of Torquil, was not satisfactory, so that on August 10, 1430 A.D. James the First, realizing that his subjects in those western lands no unfrequently flouted the authority of a sovereign living in Edinburgh and whom they never saw, appointed Alexander de Montgomerie of Adrossan and Robert Cunningham of Kilmaurs, Knights, unitedly and severally, to be governors for the space of seven years of Knapdale and Kyntyr, including the islands of Gezay (Gigha) and Danna, cum custodia (protection, custody) castri regii de Castle Soon (Sweyne) and also of that of Skipinche, Gigha at that date forming part of the Sweyne estates.⁵ Orig. Paroch. Scoticae, p. 822. This appointment of Montgomery and of Cunningham may have brought the inhabitants of Knapdale for a season into decent subordination, yet as this "season" lasted for only seven years, it is hardly to be wondered at that on the withdrawal of the "Governors the old spirit broke forth again. Nigel, the King's Chamberlain for collecting the rents of the Crown, repeated in almost each year of his administration, "that many lands in Arran had been very profitable having been terribly wasted by the "maledictos invasores" from Knapdale, presents us with an unattractive picture of the Knapdale men.

In 1145 A.D. John, son of Alexander, Lord of the Isles, confirmed the appointment made by his father to Hector Torquand or Torquil MacNeil of Gigha to be Keeper of Sweyne Castle. In 1476 A.D., John of the Isles, as the Earl of Ross, surrendered to James the Third his titles as Lord of the Isles, as also his Knapdale and Kyntyr estates including the Keepership of Sweyne Castle, so that those who had been his vassals would in future hold directly of the Crown. Shortly afterwards, these estates having been restored to him by the King, were confirmed to his natural son and his heirs. In 1478 A.D. however, John was summoned before the Parliament to explain his conduct in assisting his son Angus of the Isles, in resisting his father's surrender of Castle Sweyne. Having exculpated himself, he was allowed to remain in possession of his lands in Knapdale and Kyntyr with their Castles, except those belonging to the Crown. (MacNeil's Charters.) Thus ended the feudal connection between the descendants of Somerled and their Knapdale and Kyntyr possessions. Their power had always been adverse to that of the Scottish throne, and their turbulent spirit had been ever a source of anxiety. But with the increasing strength of a Central Authority, that of the outlying and semi-independent chieftains became gradually less, while Scottish social and political life were continuously assuming a more organized condition. With the fall of the Somerleds, the subordination of the Clans to a central authority and the unification of the people became only a question of time, the final effort of the Chieftains to re-assert their power ending in the overthrow of Culloden.

In 1480 A.D., a new family came into permanent power over Knapdale and Kyntyr. In that year⁵ (Feb. 26), James the Third granted to Colin Campbell, Earl of Argyll, "as a mark of signal favour for valuable service rendered him," 160 mercatas terrarum domini de Knapdale, unacum custodia castri regii de Castle sone vic Perth", together with all the lands lying between Locy Fyne and the Sound of Jura, running up to Lochgilp.⁶ (Gr. Seal). In 1483 A.D., the Earl, having now the responsibility for the Castle, appointed Hector of Torquil MacNeil to be its Constable or Keeper.⁷ In 1488, James the Fourth, came to the throne and on Oct. 1495, Hector Torquil MacNeil is on record, as witness to the King's signature to a charter granted by him to one Alexander Duff.

During the interval between the battle of Flodden (1513 A.D.), and the accession of James the Fifth, then an infant only eighteen months old, anarchy practically prevailed throughout the country districts of Scotland, a movement in 1516 in support of the claim of Macdonald of Lochalsh to be Lord of the Isles, causing much distress. Knapdale especially suffered through bands of marauders, so that in 1521, the Earl of Argyll as Chamberlain of Kyntyr, received considerable compensation from Parliament for the losses that he and his tenants had sustained during that period. In 1523, Argyll gave to Craignish certain lands for the free payment of certain produce of one merk in money, "to be paid at Castle Sowne (Sweyne) or elsewhere as the Earl may appoint." In 1540 A.D. King James gave to Archibald Campbell of Argyll, "for services rendered to himself in France" – probably his marriage to the daughter of Francis the First - "as well as for unpaid services at home," the lands and baronies of Kilmychell and of Skipinche cum custodia castri de Swyne. Such grants were evidently revocable at pleasure, for in 1544 the King granted in heriage to MacNeil vic Tyneishe, "natural son of Neil MacNeil of Gifha", baroniam de Kilmichael cum custodia castri de Swyne.

In 1553, the Keepership of Sweyne again changed hands. During that year, Queen Mary gave to Hector Maclaine, natural son of Alan, brother of Hector of Dowart, certain lands and confirmed him in certain others. The first document was witnessed by Duncan Campbell, Captain of Castle Suine (Sweyne) and Donald Maccalane Mackconwele of Dunard (or Dunnod) while the second was also witnessed by Duncan Campbell, and by Walter Campbell of Skipinche. The MacNeils were evidently by this time, replaced by Campbells, the kinsmen of Lorn.

In 1557, came the important announcement, that the two Kyntyrs would in future be under the direct and exclusive control of the Crown. Possible the situation of the Peninsula, open to invasion whether from

England or from Ireland and difficulty of access should trouble arise among its law-neglecting inhabitants, led the Privy Council to think such an arrangement desirable both for the welfare of the whole country and the peace of the Monarchy. Its immediate result was the strengthening the hands of Argyll and of the Lords of the Congregation, as the Reforming party was called, against any invasion of the country by a Roman Catholic force from Ireland.

This arrangement, however, was not of long continuance. On Feb. 10, 1571, (Gr. Seal) King James VI granted to Colin Campbell of Bothauhan, brother of Archibald, Earl of Argyll, the lands and lordship of Lon, Swna (Soona) and other islands and also of the lands of Kirkmichel, "cum custodia de castri de Swyne". But even this arrangement was soon altered, for on September 27, 1580, (Gr. Seal) "the lands and barony of Kilmichael "cum custodia de Sweyne" were disjoined from the Lordship of Lorn and attached to the Earldom of Argyll, the possessor of which held then the high office of Justiciar General of Scotland, while in 1602 A.D. April 23, John Stewart of Ardmotes, Sheriff of Bute, and others, were charged (Privy Counc. Vol. 6, p. 725) not to harm Marie McCloyd (or Macleod) relict of Duncan Campbell, Captain of Castle Suin or Sweyn. "Chronicles of Fortingall". In 1607 A.D. the King infefted (invested) the Earl of Argyll in Kyntyr as a reward for his suppression of the Macgregors and that he might "root out and utterly suppress" the Clan Donald. The infeftment had previously been only in fee farm.

The grants hitherto made of lands in Kyntyr to the Earl of Argyll must have been feudal not actual. He had the Lordship, but not the ownership, and hence, we find him in 1607 A.D. (Privy Counc. Reg.) asking a reward for past services in crushing the Macgregors, as compensation for the losses he had sustained when doing so, and that he might the more effectually suppress the Macdonalds. The reward he asked for was all their lands, on the ground, that "the Clan Donald has been the schoolemaisteris for fosteraris of all barbaritie, savaignes and cruelty has evir from the beginning bein addictit nocht only to rebelloun within this continent, land and the iles, bot evir were assissisteris of the northerne Irische people, dwelling in Irelande, in all their rebellionnes."

The reply to this modest request is not recorded, but we can easily infer its nature from the entry in the Gt. Seal of March 16, 1610 A.D., for while certain lands were given to him, these were for a limited number of years, and were of but limited extent. "The King for himself and as Administrator for his son, the Duke of Rothsay, grants to Archibald Argadie, Lord Campbell, of Lorn and Lochow, the lands and barony of Kilmichael, cum custodia castri de Swyne, terras et baroniam de Skypinche vic Tarbert."

Half a century previously, another storm had broken out and national life was still chaotic. The Roman Catholic church had been badly served by its priests, and was now to suffer. Men everywhere demanded a change in its administration, leading quickly to a demand for a change of the church itself. Many of the Chiefs and Nobles, joined in the popular demand, though perhaps not in all cases from the purest motives. Many were doubtless perfectly sincere in wishing a purer church and Church administration, and joined the Reformers simply because they failed to see that their desires were met by the Church of Rome. Others saw an opportunity for putting some curb on the overweening haughtiness and domination of that Church, while yet others might be hoping for re-distribution of the Church's wealth, when they might not only regain properties given to the Church by some long dead ancestor for its prayers on his behalf but obtain possession of some much coveted estate. But whatever the motives, Scotland was stirred to its very depths and as every Chief held the dogma "cujus regio eju religio" so every clansman followed his chief in his Church as well as in the battle. Among those who connected themselves with the Reformation was Archibald, Earl of Argyll, and among those who doubtless followed his example would be the Mactavishes of Dun-ArdRigh. Such as might disregard the example of their Chief, were soon shown their danger. During 1754, the Earl of Argyll "made a 'Visitation' of Lorne, Kyntyr and Knapdale, for the purpose of holding 'Justice Courts' and of dealing with numerous

offenders. The Earl himself was Judge and Jury, and on the moment of his passing sentences, the wretched offenders were hurried to the gallows and instantly hung.” The Report says that the number of those judicially murdered on this occasion, was “Eight score or thereabout!”

During the rising of Sir James Macdonald of Islay in 1615 A.D. which threatened to throw the whole country into confusion (Gregory, p. 381)⁸, James appointed the Earl of Argyll as his Deputy for the government of the Isles, and the subjugation of their turbulent Island Noble. Argyll mustered four hundred hired soldiers at “the Castle of Soerne” (Sweyne Castle), on September 2, the Knapdale and Cowall men, the Lamonts, MacDougalls, MacLachlans and others, swelling his army. Sir James soon found himself out-generaled as well as in a great numerical inferiority, and was compelled to flee, seeking safety in Ireland so that at this date, Sweyne Castle was still an important position and well known for military purposes.⁹ In 1635, James, brother of Archibald, Lord of Lorn and Earl of Irvine, agreed to sell either the lands of Kilmichael, or some other lands held by members of the House of Argyll, such as the Lordship and Barony of Kyntyre at the tower and fortalice of Dunaverty, to Randolph Macdonald, Earl of Antrim, who was also Viscount of Dunluce, being the second son of Sorley Buy – (Sorley of the yellow hair) - of the Glens and the Route in Antrim. The watchful Privy Council however (Reg. 2nd Series, Vol. 6, p. 30) interfered, and having learned that “James, Lord Kintyre, had disposed Kintyre to the Viscount of Dunluce” cancelled all such disposing, and declared the action already taken null and void on the ground that it was undesirable that any Irish nobleman and leader should have landlord rights in Kintyre.

Sweyne Castle which was still habitable, now passed (says Buchanan of Auchmar – “Enquiry into Scottish Surnames), into the hands of the MacMillans or the Clan Mhic Gillamoil who were said by some to be descended from one Methlan in Ireland, and by others to have been driven away from Loch Tayside in the time of David the Second *1329-30 A.D., when its members sought a home in South Knapdale. From Lord Macdonald, head of the Clan Donald as descended from a son of Reginald Somerled’s second son, they obtained leave to settle in south-western Knapdale, where the head of the family soon became known as “The Great MacMillan of Knap”. Through a marriage in the Sixteenth century with the heiress of the MacNeil’s of Gigha, they acquired extensive estates including Castle Sweyne once of them adding a tower or wing to the original building giving this his own name which, in fairly good condition, it still bears amid all the ruins of the early castle. The MacMillans remained a powerful family in Knapdale for a couple of centuries, when they removed to Galloway and became the ancestors of the MacMillans of that country.¹⁰

¹ Maclauchlan, Hist. Of Scotland, p 143: “We may safely infer that Fergus was king of what is now Argyll, in the beginning of the Sixth century, having his residence in some portion of what is called Knapdale, either at Castle Sween or Dunmoniadh (**Dunrostan**), an ancient fort whose ruins may be traced not far from the mouth of the Crinan Canal.” The site of the present Castle Sween is magnificently adapted for defensive military purposes, and was very probably utilized for such by King Fergus, but the existent ruins must be those of a much later edifice, probably of the building mentioned in the Craignish Annals.

² The Baliols, descended from Guy Baliol a follower of Wm. The conqueror, lived at Barnard’s Castle (built by Bernard B., son of Guy) in Durham, and were greatly enriched by Wm. Rufus.

³ See Surtees Hist. Of Durham, Vol. 2., An old family named Hoton owned Heworth and Hardwyck, the latter having been bought in 1435 from Robert Bruce.

⁴ This power of hanging criminals, or alleged criminals, was no mere technical or formal permission but a dreadful reality. It was the outcome of that Heritable Jurisdiction which every Highland Chief was allowed to exercise over the men of his own

Clan. The Chief was both judge and jury in every matter that concerned his own men, and from his decisions there was no appeal, while the sentences imposed were usually inflicted without a moment's delay.

⁵ King David (1124-53 A.D.) had already set up in the Lowlands, the Saxon or Norman system and divided the country in Sheriffdoms. To do so with the Highlands was, at that date, impossible, but he introduced the principle, by forming all the lands north of the Mounth, into the Sheriffdom of Inverness, and all lands south of that great range into the Sheriffdom of Perth. Thus up to the time of Alexander the Second, Southern Argyll was in the Sheriffdom of Perth. Skene's Highlands p. 195

⁶ A very small part of Upper Cowall had been included in the new Sheriffdom of Argyll, the remainder still continuing connected with Perthshire.

⁷ The MacNeils are said to derive their descent from a certain Gilliebride who claimed to be King of the Isles and alledged descent from Suibne (Syfyn) or Sweyen, the ancestor of the Macdonald who was slain 1034 A.D. From a son of that Suibne, came the MacNeils, hence it was natural, that as Sweyne Castle was within their feudal territory that a MacNeil should be its hereditary Keeper. In 1446, this Clan divided into the Clan of MacNeil of Gigha, and that of Barra.

⁸ [The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland, from A.D.1493 to A.D. 1625, with a Brief Introductory Sketch, from A.D. 80 to A.D. 1493, by Donald Gregory, 2nd Edition 1881, John Donald Publishers Ltd. Edinburgh, ISBN 0 85976 008 1, Reprinted 1975](#)

⁹ 1617 A.D. By an Act now passed, the action of 1607 was changed from a lease to a gift, and this, not to Argyll's eldest son, the Lord of Lorne, but to the eldest son by his second marriage, provision being made for the payment of his creditors, however.

The formation of the Kintyre lands into the Lordship of Kintyre was rejected by the Lords, and the King's gift made conditional on the Earl's creditors having their claims fully met.

¹⁰ The Charter of the Macmillans was out in Gaelic on a rock at the extremity of their estate which was subsequently divided between the Campbells and the MacNeils. The inscription remained, we are told, until 1775, when the land was purchased by Sir Archibald Campbell of Inverneil, but was effaced some thirty years ago by a member of his family.