Introduction

A Celtic Dirk at Scotland's Back? The Lordship of the Isles in Mainstream Scottish Historiography since 1828

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This volume of essays has its origin in a chance conversation in 1993 in which it emerged that no event had been organised to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles by King James IV of Scotland. The result was a small academic conference the following year based at Ballygrant on Islay, close to the former symbolic centre of the Lordship at Finlaggan, and plans to bring the papers from that conference together as a published collection. That plan never matured and the conference papers which represented the contribution of different disciplines to the study of the MacDonald Lordship mainly found homes in academic journals or were incorporated into larger research publications. Individually, none came close to offering the chronological depth or disciplinary breadth that the multi-author collection had promised and, while in the last two decades there has been a renaissance of research into the Late Medieval period in the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland – focussed especially on the Church – a comprehensive modern overview of the MacDonald lordship in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has remained a conspicuous absentee on the publications horizon.

The essays in this volume, amongst which are two substantially revised and developed papers from that original 1994 conference, are not claimed to constitute such a comprehensive overview; they focus on key themes that illustrate the culture(s) and identity/identities of the territories encompassed by the MacDonald Lordship at its peak, from portable personal artefacts to ships, buildings and the visual signifiers of heraldry; episodes critical in the development, downfall and disintegration of the MacDonalds’ imperium; and institutions that gave form and substance to MacDonald power. None are ‘traditional’, indeed some might be regarded as iconoclastic in the challenges that they present to conventional understanding of issues such as the MacDonalds’ relations with the Bruce family in Scotland and the Lancastrian kings in England, or the feudal/military lens through which castle-building and the projection of lordship in the West Highlands and Islands have long been viewed. By breaking through the constraining framework of prejudices and preconceptions that are the legacy of nineteenth-century historiography, these essays offer a new set of perspectives on the complex of land, sea, people, material expressions
and mental imaginings that together constituted the political embodiment of the medieval Scottish Gaidhealtachd.

But what was that embodiment of the medieval Scottish Gaidhealtachd? There is perhaps a tendency to view it as territorially monolithic, a single entity that spanned the whole of the Hebrides and much of the West Highland mainland, united under a sole ruler and sharing common linguistic and material cultural norms. A key aim in assembling this collection of essays has been to take a fresh look at that vision of unitary identity free from the expressions of ‘manifest destiny’ that coloured much nineteenth-century writing that revolved around Clan Donald and the claims voiced on its behalf by generations of Gaelic sennachaidhs and clan historians to a role as rightful leaders of the Gael. These claims ‘established’ the MacDonalds' descent extending back to the apical figure of Somerled/Somairle, and then founded on a concocted royal pedigree equal to that of the kings of Scots from him to the ninth-century Irish warrior Gofraidh, son of Fergus, who was described anachronistically in the seventeenth-century *Annals of the Four Masters* as ‘chief of the Innsi Gall’ at the time of his death.¹ In re-evaluating that traditional vision, many of the contributors have confronted a series of the pillars upon which several of the established perceptions of the MacDonalds' place within the wider frame of Scottish history have been constructed. Questioning the teleological determinism and Whiggish perspectives of much nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century historiography, they have raised challenging questions over the traditional projection of the Lordship as a ‘state-within-a-state’ competing with Lowland Scotland's anglophone political community for primacy, threatening both the territorial integrity and independent existence of the kingdom, and whose rulers' prestige and power rivalled the authority of the kings of Scots. Beyond this political historical recontextualisation, however, these studies have also explored aspects of the social and cultural behaviour of the MacDonalds, questioning the traditional presentation of the relationship with the east and south of the mainland in terms of socio-cultural polar opposites and revealing instead the interconnectedness and hybridity of what has long been depicted as distinct blocs. Sharp cleavages there certainly were between the predominantly Gaelic- and predominantly English-speaking districts, but there were equally sharp distinctions within those blocs and areas where cultural interfaces were blurred.