

CLAN MACRAE SOCIETY OF CANADA
ONLINE

THE SCOTTISH NATION

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Excerpt ...

Macrae, a minor clan of Ross-shire, which has from time immemorial been subordinate to the Seaforth branch of the Mackenzies. The badge of the Macraes was the fir-club moss, and they are generally considered of the pure Gaelic stock, although they have also been stated to be of Irish origin, and to have come over to Scotland about the middle of the 13th century. They are said to have fought under Fitzgerald, the supposed founder of the clan Mackenzie at the battle of Largs in 1263. They settled first in the Aird of Lovat, but subsequently emigrated into Glensheil in the district of Kintail, Ross-shire. Dr. Johnson has inserted in his 'Tour to the Western Isles,' a story which he says he heard in the Hebrides, that the Macraes "were originally an indigent and subordinate clan, servants to the Maclennans, who, in the wars of Charles I., took arms at the call of the heroic Montrose, and were, in one of his battles, almost destroyed. The women were left at home, being thus deprived of their husbands, like the Scythian ladies of old, married their servants, and the Macraes became a considerable race." The writer of the account of the parish of Glensheil, in the New Statistical Account of Scotland, pronounces this an unworthy invention, "destitute of all foundation, and contradicted by ample evidence, written and traditional." Someone had imposed on the credulity of the great lexicographer. At the battle of Auldearn, in May 1645, the Macraes fought under the Mackenzie chief in the ranks of Montrose, and more of their number fell than of the Maclennans. They were defeated at the battle of Glensheil, under William earl of Seaforth in 1719, when a body of 400 Spaniards attempted to make a landing in the Stuart interest. When that nobleman, for his share in the troubles of 1715 and 1719, was obliged to retire to the Continent, and his lands were forfeited, so strong was the attachment of the Macraes and Maclennans to him, that, during the time the forfeiture lasted it baffled all the efforts of government and its commissioner, Ross of Fearnie, to penetrate into his territory, or to collect any rents in Kintail. On one occasion Ross and his son with a party of men set off to collect the rents, and fearing some on the way, he sent his son forward, on his own horse, when a shot from a rifle laid him dead. The father and his party immediately abandoned their intentions, and returned home in haste. Seaforth's tenants were aided in their resistance by the advice of Donald Murchison of Auchtertyre, who regularly collected the rents, and found means to remit them to Seaforth, then in France.

The chief or head of the Clann 'Ic Rath Mholach, or "Hairy Macraes," called by Nisbet the "Macrachs," and pronounced MacCraws, was Macrae of Inverinate in Kintail. A MS. Genealogical account of the Macraes, written by the Rev. John Macrae, minister in Dingwall, who died in 1704, was in possession of the late Lieutenant-colonel Sir John Macrae of Ardintoul. This secluded and primitive tribe were remarkable for their great size and courage, and it is recorded that one Duncan Macrae, who lived in the beginning of the 18th century, had such amazing strength, that he carried for some distance a stone of immense size, and laid it down on the farm of Achangart, where it is yet to be seen. He rendered himself famous by recovering stolen cattle from the reivers of Lochaber, either belonging to himself or his neighbours. He was the author of several poetical pieces, and was killed, with many of his clan, at Sheriffmuir in 1715. His claymore, long preserved in the Tower of London, was shown as "the great Highlander's sword."

A great number of the clan Macrae enlisted in the Seaforth Highlanders, when that regiment was raised in 1778, and their mutiny at Leith soon after their enrolment gave rise to a memorable occurrence which was called "the affair of the wild Macraws." The regiment had been raised chiefly from among his own tenantry, by the restored earl of Seaforth, grandson of the earl who had been attainted for his participating in the rebellion of 1715. It formed a corps of 1,130 men. Of these, about 900 were Highlanders, 500 of whom were Mackenzies and Macraes, from his lordship's own estate, and the remainder were obtained from the estates of Scatwell, Kilcoy, Applecross, Redcastle, and others belonging to gentlemen of the name of Mackenzie, all of whom had sons or brothers among the officers. Embodied at Elgin in May of the year mentioned, the regiment was inspected by General Skene, when it was found so effective that not one man was rejected. In the month of August the regiment proceeded to Edinburgh, and in September marched to Leith for embarkation to the East Indies; but it had not been long quartered in that town when the men showed signs of discontent, and murmurs began to be expressed amongst them that "they had been sold to the East India Company." They had enlisted to serve

only for a limited period, and not out of Great Britain, and they complained of an infringement of their agreement, and that part of their pay and bounty money was in arrear, kept back from them, as they alleged, by their officers.

As they could obtain neither satisfaction nor redress, on Tuesday, 22d September, when the regiment was drawn up on Leith Links, preparatory to entering the boats which were to convey them to the transports lying in Leith roads, about 600 of the men refused to embark, and marching out of Leith, with pipes playing and two plaids fixed on poles instead of colours, took up a position on Arthur's Seat, an eminence 800 feet high, in the immediate neighbourhood of Edinburgh. There they remained for three nights, amply supplied in the meantime with provisions by the inhabitants of the capital. Two days were spent in negotiations with them, in which the earls of Dunmore and Seaforth, Lord Macdonald, Sir James Grant of Grant, and other gentlemen connected with the Highlands, took an active and prominent part, and on Friday morning a bond was signed by the duke of Buccleuch, the earl of Dunmore, Sir Adolphus Oughton, and General Skene, the latter two officers first and second in command of the forces in Scotland, containing the following conditions: A pardon to the Highlanders for all past offences; all levy money and arrears due to them to be paid before embarking, and that they should not be sent to the East Indies. The soldiers being satisfied, marched down the hill with pipes playing, the earls of Seaforth and Dunmore at their head, and returned to their quarters at Leith. The result of an inquiry which was afterwards made was, that there was no foundation for complaints against the officers on the ground of pay or arrear, and that "the cause of this retiring to Arthur's Seat was from an idle and ill-founded report that the regiment was sold to the East India Company, and that the officers were to leave them on their being sent to Guernsey, and the other half to Jersey. In May 1781, having expressed their willingness to go to the East Indies, the regiment embarked at Portsmouth for Madras. The colonel, the earl of Seaforth, died before they reached St. Helena, when his cousin, Lieutenant-colonel Humberston Mackenzie, succeeded to the command. The regiment was first called the 78th, but the number was subsequently altered to the 72^d, and in 1823 it got the name of "the duke of Albany's Highlanders."

When the second battalion of the Ross-shire Highlanders, or 78th regiment, was raised in 1804, one gentleman of this name, Christopher Macrae, brought eighteen of his own clan as part of his portion of recruits for an ensigncy. This regiment served in Egypt in 1807, and at El Hamet, a village on the Nile, nearly six miles above Rosetta, a desperate affair took place, the British being attacked by a strong body of Turks, Albanians, and Arabs, and a great number of officers and men were killed. On this occasion, says General Stewart of Garth, in his 'Sketches of the Highlanders,' "Sergeant John Macrae, a young man about twenty-two years of age, but of good size and strength of arm, showed that the broadsword, in a firm hand, is as good a weapon in close fighting as the bayonet. Macrae killed six men, cutting them down with his broadsword, (of the kind usually worn by sergeants of Highland corps,) when at last he made a dash out of the ranks on a Turk, whom he cut down; but as he was returning to the square he was killed by a blow from behind, his head being nearly split in two by the stroke of a sabre. Lieutenant Christopher Macrae, already mentioned as having brought eighteen men of his own name to the regiment as part of his quota of recruits, for an ensigncy, was killed in this affair, with six of his followers and namesakes, besides the sergeant. On the passage to Lisbon in October 1805, the same sergeant came to me one evening (General Stewart was a major in the regiment) crying like a child, and complaining that the ship's cook had called him English names, which he did not understand, and thrown some fat in his face. Thus a lad who in 1805 was so soft and so childish, displayed in 1807 a courage and vigour worthy a hero of Ossian."

Both males and females of the Macraes are said to have evinced an extraordinary taste for poetry and music. John Macrae, better known among his countrymen as Mac Uirtsi, whose family are said to have possessed the gift of poetry for some generations, emigrated to America, in consequence of the innovations on the ancient habits of the Highlanders, and feelingly regretted, in Gaelic verse, his having left his native country. A poem composed by him on a heavy loss of cattle is considered by many equal to anything in the language.

One of this clan was an able governor of Madras, in commemoration of whom a monument is erected on a rising ground in the parish of Prestwick, Ayrshire.

Captain James Macrae of Holmains in April 1790 had the misfortune to shoot Sir James Ramsay of Bamff, baronet, in a duel at Musselburgh, and was obliged in consequence to leave Scotland. He was cited before the high court of justiciary upon criminal letters to take his trial for murder, in the following July, and outlawed for non-appearance. He had previously conveyed his estate to trustees, who, in conformity with his instructions, executed an entail of it. He died abroad 16th January 1820, leaving a son and a daughter.

Source: The Scottish Nation; or the Surnames, Families, Literature, Honours, and Biographical History of the People of Scotland; Vol. III.; Anderson, William; A. Fullerton & Co., 44 South Bridge, Edinburgh; 1863; pg. 69-71
