



Our ancestral land lies in the mountains of northwest Scotland, known as Wester Ross, and no part of it is far from the sea and the influence of the Gulf Stream – it is hidden in mist or swept by the damp west winds. The heights are largely barren now, but in the early days of the Clan, the great Caledonian forest still covered the mountains with a dense growth of fir, birch and oak, from their peaks to the shores of the long sea lochs and the marshy borders of trout-filled lakes. The largest lake is Loch Maree, which runs for 12 miles, cold and deep, down the centre of the parish of Gairloch. It was here – at the point where Maree flows into the Atlantic – that the first Lochend was founded in 1730.

By then we had been Mackenzies of Gairloch for three hundred years. We were part of the laird's line, the regional Clan leadership, and had a reputation for judiciousness, and also for wit and creativity. Our relation,

Osgoode Mackenzie, would turn the Lochend estate into one of the most imaginatively designed gardens in all Scotland, currently visited by 73,000 tourists each year, and known as Inverewe. He was also a charming writer, as was his uncle, Dr. John Mackenzie, son of the laird, Sir Hector, and you will hear their voices as well as mine, and Aunt Kay's, in this family chronicle.

THE MACKENZIES ARE CELTIC IN ORIGIN, UNLIKE OUR mortal enemies the Macleods, whose ancestors were Scandinavian. We were Highland Celts dating back before there are records, part of the great culture centered beyond the Irish Sea. The Celts were originally known as Picts, a people who migrated north from Africa and left themselves in Spain's Basque country and on France's Breton shore before pressing further northward along the coastline. Scotland, the land of Scots, was actually the land of these Picts, who practiced a sophisticated form



The Callanish Standing Stones, Outer Hebrides.
(Western Isles of Scotland).

of sun worship featuring neat tricks of geometry, astronomy and engineering in order to create their standing stone circles precisely calibrated with the solstice.

The Picts inhabited both Ireland and the Highlands, and were characteristic for their intellectual and metaphysical curiosity – as opposed to the Vikings, who perfected naval art in order to pillage along the North Atlantic’s hapless shores. Vikings were, if you like, the capitalists of their day, hedonists and profiteers who worshipped acquisitive success. The Picts, who founded Celtic culture, were disinterested in material success, and wanted to forge sense and meaning in the world.

The name “Scotland” comes from a small group of Irish Celts who crossed the sea and traveled to an area now called Argyll (unjustly famous for socks) in the 6th century, founding their own little kingdom amongst the Picts. They were convinced, rightly or wrongly, that they were descendents of an Egyptian Pharaoh’s daughter named Scota, who had eloped with a Celtic princeling. (Celts conveyed inheritance through the matrilineal line, and their queens rode alongside

their kings in battle.) The leader of this migrant band of Celts, Fergus MacErc, brought with him an object called the Stone of Destiny, which he claimed that Scota had exported from Egypt, and which actually played a role in Scots-English bickering for several centuries as various victors claimed to have seized it. Did the Stone of Destiny guarantee its possessors special powers? Did it afford them excellent health or superior cocktails? We can’t know. But, somehow the entire fable led to a name we all know well indeed.

We glean little of Scotland during the Dark Ages. “Just for a moment,” as Aunt Kay wrote, “in the early 8th century the light shines on what was to be known, hundreds of years later, as Mackenzie Country. Saint Maelrubha, the apostle of Gairloch, went about on his little island in Loch Maree, and the ruins of the little church he built are known, as is the exact date of his death – 21 April, 722. Then the dark returns with the Viking raids.”

In fact, Maelrubha dwelled on The Isle of the Moon, deemed sacred since the Iron Age. According to research done by our Mackenzie kin, Peter Cook, this was where “the ancient rituals of kingship had been performed in Moray for over 1,000 years.” Would-be rulers were brought to the 90-foot high island for preparation, before entering into ceremonial marriage with the goddess Brighde. Our ancestor in the early 11th century, Gilleon na h’Aird, a chief and first cousin to the king of Moray, may well have been the spiritual leader who oversaw this sacrament. (In Gaelic, the name Gilleon is connected with ‘Holy Servant.’)

Constant was the sea mist, the heather, the silence, the crannocks and the circling eagles. The humans, however, were in uproarious, battling flux during Gilleon’s time. The great Celtic Family of Ross, with whom the Mackenzies share ancestry, ruled over the



northern Highlands for much of this period while the Danes, Norwegians, French and English seized and lost and seized the coastal islands.

Our Clan only rose into traceable identity in the late 13th century. The name Mackenzie, son of Kenneth, or in Gaelic – son of “the fair one” – was first used by John of Kintail, who is reputedly buried in Icolmkil on the sacred isle of Iona. In Iona, Kenneth’s bones lie with those of the most ancient kings of Ireland and Scotland.

How did he earn the Mackenzie shield and choose the motto: “Cuidich ‘N Righ” meaning “Help the King?” One story is that he rescued King Alexander III in 1263. The King was imperiled by a charging stag, it is said, and our ancestor slayed it with an arrow. Athletic, quick, valiant. For this deed, and for his victory against marauding Danes, he was awarded the gorgeous, mountainous lands of Kintail, opposite the

Isle of Skye, as well as the right to form the hereditary Royal bodyguard, which Mackenzies did until the 16th century. (Whether or not Kenneth shot menacing deer, it was inhabiting and holding the castle Eileen Donan against the Danes on behalf of the King and the Earl of Moray, then refusing to give said castle back, that actually cemented his power.)

With land, the Mackenzies were able to become a Clan, and all of the resources were held in common between clan members, as they are here in Canada among First Nations. The Chief protected and expanded this land, and in return commanded fealty from his kin when feuds with other Clans arose – primarily over access to food. In other words, this wasn’t a class-based system; it was kin-based and fiercely aspiring because basic sustenance was so extremely scarce.

There were eagle chicks, if you climbed high enough. Scant crops of oats and barley, and later potatoes, growing in the patches of peaty soil between the marshes and the rocks. The pasture supported herds of small black cattle, who almost starved to death each winter for lack of hay and had to be physically carried out of sod houses to crop on new grass. Venison and salmon were in the lairds’ preserve, but not in the crofters’. The sea was full of fish, but the Clan system did not lend itself to efficient labour and the seafood most easily got by the common folk was shellfish when the tide was out. For greens there were kale and nettles. (Luckily and coincidentally both insanely nutritious.) Scrabbling and feuding as they had to, the Highlanders were nevertheless a strong, alert people with a lively sense of drama, proud of belonging to their Clan and holding in great honour their bards, pipers and harpists. Art and spirituality were powerful forces in their tough lives. Few outsiders visited, as there weren’t any roads, but in 1699 one southerner, Edward Lhuyd, spent some time

there and wrote, “the main cause of their being reputed barbarous I take to be no other than their retaining their ancient habits, customs, and language.”

“Dr. Johnson once said that the Highlanders’ religion was military,” wrote our Aunt Kay. Insofar as they worshipped their tartans and dirks, this was true. Their spirituality, however, was something altogether different: an evolving admixture of fairy faith, druidic ritual and Christian fable. In the 17th century, a certain Hector Mackenzie was summoned before the Presbytery,

the lichen on rocks turned red after a frost, this was considered to be the blood of fairies spilled during their ardent combat.

Fairies could be helpful with chores and seductive in love, but they also had to be appeased on a regular basis, due to their predilection for stealing babies, shadows and cows. One assumes it was the life spirit they stole, since it’s difficult to picture them dragging Highland cattle into a burrow with the determination of ants making off with an oversize breadcrumb. But



accused of sacrificing a bull in Loch Maree for the restoration of the health of his wife Cirstane. (The Loch also hosted its own beastie, Muc-Sheilch, from whom we beg protection from the guid lord.) Hallowee’n was the meeting point of the three faiths, for it began with the Druids, became Christianized as All Soul’s Day, and was also known to be a time for fairy battles. When

they stole. Iron had to be placed around the cradles of newborn infants and strips of leather burned, and people strictly avoided certain grassy knolls and trees known as fairy forts, for fear they’d be abducted. Our ancestors often heard them sing, even learning Gaelic melodies at fairy weddings, and if you went to a fairy dance, you would think you’d just been gone for the

night but twenty years might pass – like the enchantments of Shangri-la. There is a flag hanging in Clan Macleod’s Dunvegan Castle that was said to have been a gift to the Chief, 800 years ago, from a fairy queen.

In the late 19th century, American anthropologist Walter Evans-Weintz traveled through the Highlands collecting accounts of the fairy faith. Here are two from the Hebrides, which lend a wonderful sense of the Gaelic mindset. In 1865, Ann Macneil of Barra provided this report:

“I have never seen a man fairy nor a woman fairy, but my mother saw a troop of them. She herself and the other maidens of the townland were once out upon the summer sheiling (grazing). They were milking the cows, in the evening gloaming, when they observed a flock of fairies reeling and setting upon the green plain in front of the knoll. And, oh King! But it was they the fairies themselves that had the right to the dancing, and not the children of men! Bell-helmets of blue silk covered their heads, and garments of green satin covered their bodies, and sandals of yellow membrane covered their feet. Their heavy brown hair was streaming down their waist, and its lustre was of the fair golden sun of summer. Their skin was as white as the swan of the wave, and their voice was as melodious as the mavis [a song bird] of the wood, and they themselves were as beauteous of feature and as lithe of form as a picture, while their step was as light and stately and their minds as sportive as the little red hind of the hill. The damsel children of the sheiling-fold never saw sight but them, no never sight but them, never aught so beautiful.”

She continued, explaining the Highland belief that fairies were fallen angels: “There is not a wave of prosperity upon the fairies of the knoll, no, not a wave. There is no growth nor increase, no death nor withering upon the fairies. Seed unfortunate they! They went away from

the Paradise with the One of the Great Pride. When the Father commanded the doors closed down and up, the intermediate fairies had no alternative but to leap into the holes of the earth, where they are, and where they will be. This is what I heard upon the knee of my beloved mother. Blessings be with her ever evermore!”

Evans-Weinz collected this second account from Angus Macleod of Harris, which reveals the same astonishing flair for language that would have made the Highland Bards so mesmerizing as they passed along our oral traditions:

“That is as I heard when a hairy little fellow upon the knee of my mother.” (That there were fairies.) “My mother was full of stories and songs of music and chanting. My two ears never heard musical fingers more preferable for me to hear than the chanting of my mother. If there were quarrels among children, as there were, and as there will be, my beloved mother would set us to dance there and then. She herself or one of the other crofter women of the townland would sing to us the mouth-music and we would dance there till we were seven times tired. A stream of sweat would be falling from us before we stopped – hairful little lassies and stumpy little fellows. These are scattered today! Scattered today over the wide world! The people of those times were full of music and dancing, stories and traditions. The clerics have extinguished these. May ill befall them! And what have the clerics put in their place? Beliefs about creeds, and disputations about denominations and churches! May lateness be their lot! It is they who have put the cross round the heads and the entanglements round the feet of the people. The people of the Gaeldom of today are aneaperishing for lack of the famous feats of their fathers. The black clerics have suppressed every noble custom among the people of the Gaeldom – precious customs that will never return, no never again return.”