

The Highland CLANS of Scotland: Their History and Traditions

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With an Introduction by A. M. MACKINTOSH

WITH ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS, INCLUDING
REPRODUCTIONS OF WIAN'S CELEBRATED PAINTINGS OF THE COSTUMES
OF THE CLANS

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CLAN MACNICOL

OF the ancient races of the West and North which have been dignified with the title of the Great Clans, only one may be said to have fallen entirely to pieces in the course of time. The fact speaks volumes for the vitality of these warrior tribes, and the healthiness of the seemingly hard conditions amid which they lived and struggled. The conclusions of Skene in his *Highlanders of Scotland* have not always been approved by later writers, but it is worth noting that he identifies Clan Nicol with the Kairinoi of the early geographer Ptolemy. Skene identifies the Ness district of the Norwegian sagas with the region in the north-west of Scotland now known as Edyrachillis, Duirinish, and Assynt, and he declares that "the most ancient Gaelic clan which can be traced as inhabiting these districts is the clan Nicaïl or MacNicol." In the article on "Assynt" in the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, the Rev. William Mackenzie records that "Tradition and even documents declare that it was a forest of the ancient Thaners of Sutherland. One of these Prince Thaners gave it in vassalage to one Macrycul, who in ancient times held the coast of Coygeach, that part of it at the place presently called Ullapool. The noble Thane made Assynt over in the above manner, as Mackrycul had recovered a great quantity of cattle carried off from the county of Sutherland by foreign invaders." Mackenzie adds in a note, "Mackrycul is reputed by the people here to be the potent man of whom are descended the Macnicols, Nicols, and Nicolson." According to the Gaelic genealogical manuscript of 1450, on which Skene founds so much of his writing regarding the clans, this account is probably correct, for in that manuscript the descent of the Clan Nicaïl is traced in a direct line from a certain Gregall, who is obviously the Krycul of the tradition. Further, as the letters r and n are interchangeable in Gaelic, it can easily be seen how Macrycul became MacNicaïl or MacNicol, of which the English translation is of course Nicolson. The recovery of the great herd of Sutherland cattle from Norwegian invaders is believed to have been accomplished by Macrycul or MacNicol of Coygeach some time in the twelfth century. To accomplish such a feat he must have been at the head of a considerable army or clan, so the probability is that the race of Krycul or Gregall had been chiefs at Ullapool for a long period before that. This would take their ancestry back to the days of Malcolm Canmore at least.



MAC NICOL

About the time of the battle of Bannockburn the line of the MacNicol chiefs ended in an heiress who married Torquil, a younger son of MacLeod of the Lewis, and the pair obtained a Crown charter of the lands of Assynt and

others which had been the MacNicol property. From this marriage descended fourteen successive MacLeod lairds of Assynt. It was one of these MacLeods of Assynt who in 1650 earned the execration of the Highlanders by handing over the Great Marquess of Montrose to the Covenanting Government at whose head was his implacable enemy, the crafty Marquess of Argyll. MacLeod was then in money difficulties, which perhaps explained his willingness to earn the Government reward. Ten years later his chief creditor, the Earl of Seaforth, foreclosed his wadsets and took possession of the Assynt estates. Still later Assynt was purchased by the Sutherland family. The more northern part of the old MacNicol country remained in other hands till MacLeod of Edyrachillis and Morison of Duirinish took occasion to engage in a feud, whereupon their neighbours the MacKays, then at the height of their power, stepped in and wrested these estates from both families, and from that time Edyrachillis and Duirinish became parts of the Lord Reay's country.

Meanwhile, on the death of the last MacNicol of Coygeach, Assynt, Edyrachillis, and Duirinish, the chiefship of the clan had by patriarchal law, passed to the nearest male of the race, and the seat of this line was afterwards removed to Scoirebreac, a beautiful spot on the coast of Skye near Portree. Here they appear to have shown their piety, prevision, or ostentation by benefactions to the religious house, of which the ruins may yet be seen on an island at the head of Loch Snizort. A small chapel on the south side of the main buildings is still known as MacNicol's Aisle, and within it is to be seen the effigy of a warrior in conical helmet and long quilted coat or habergeon, who must have been a man of much power in his time.

Of one of these chiefs of Scoirebreac a tradition is recorded which furnishes a curious illustration of the ancient ideas of clan honour and the rules of blood vengeance. The chief concerned, known as MacNicol Mor, from his great size, was one day engaged in a warm discussion with MacLeod of Raasay, his neighbour across the sound. At the height of the debate MacLeod's servant came into the room. The two were talking in English, so the man did not know the meaning of what was said, but under the impression that a serious quarrel was on foot, he drew his sword and dealt MacNicol a blow from which he died. To decide how the deed should be avenged and a feud between the two families avoided, a meeting of chiefs and elders was at once called. These men of wisdom decided that as the MacNicol chief had been slain by the hand of a menial MacLeod, the Laird of Raasay should be beheaded by the meanest of MacNicol's clansmen. The humblest of the latter was found to be one Lomach, a maker of horse panniers, and by him Raasay was duly put to death. The execution took place near Snizort. At the fatal moment the victim was in the act of speaking, and so deftly did Lomach take off his head that as it rolled

down the hill the onlookers distinctly heard the sounds "ip ip" from its lips. From this circumstance the little mount was afterwards known as Cnoc an h-ip. It is satisfactory to know that the sacrifice of the Laird of Raasay prevented all further shedding of blood between the MacLeods and the MacNicol.

Stories of the MacNicol of Scoirebreac come down to the beginning of the nineteenth century. About that time, according to the author of the letterpress in M'lan's *Clans of the Scottish Highlands*, at a banquet of the clansmen given to celebrate some joyful occasion, there was a call for the bards to come to the upper end of the room. Convinced of the hopelessness of the summons MacNicol of Scoirebreac exclaimed, "The bards are extinct!" He was promptly taken to task by one of the company, Alastair bui' Mac Ivor, who retorted, "No, they are not extinct, but those who delighted to patronise them are gone."

While the seat of the MacNicol chiefs was in Skye there were many of the name scattered throughout the county of Argyll, and of these there were several individuals whose characteristics or exploits have been perpetuated in tradition. One of them, reputed to be a seer, obtained the name of Gualan Crostadh from his rule never to look behind him. For the same reason he was also known as "an Teallsanach" or the Philosopher. As might be expected of such a personage, a crop of stories was long extant regarding him. Another of the clan, Gillespie MacNicol, attained fame by a rescue he effected at somewhat serious cost to himself. After the last Jacobite rising a widow's son had fallen into the hands of the "red soldiers," as Government troops were called, and they were carrying him off, when the redoubtable Gillespie came to the rescue. Attacking the soldiers, he slew one or two, put the others to flight, and set the captive free. Unluckily, as he did so, he received a swordstroke in the face which carried off his nose.

Strangely enough, notwithstanding the evident importance of the MacNicol in their early days, the clan seems never to have had a tartan. After the beginning of the fourteenth century, when the heiress of the early line of chiefs married a MacLeod, they seem to have merged in the following of that clan, and probably they adopted the MacLeod tartan.

Among members of the clan who have attained more than local repute was the Rev. Donald MacNicol, whose best known work was his defence of the Highlands against the accusations made by Dr. Samuel Johnson in his *Journey to the Hebrides*. Of the same period also were the Rev. Francis Nicoll, D.D., Principal of St. Leonard's and St. Salvador's Colleges, St. Andrews, and Robert Nicoll, the poet who became editor of the *Leeds Times* in 1836. Still later were

the Nichols, father and son, professors, one of astronomy and the other of English literature at Glasgow University. There was also Alexander Nicolson, the Gaelic scholar who died Sheriff-Substitute of Greenock in 1893. He is chiefly remembered by his revision of the Gaelic Bible and his collection of Gaelic proverbs. One of the ablest journalists of recent times, too, was Sir William Robertson Nicol, founder of *The British Weekly* and "discoverer" of Sir J. M. Barrie and other well-known writers.

It should be noted that the lowland name Nicholson, once represented by the Nicholsons of Carnock, a family now merged, with the Shaws of Greenock, in that of the Stewarts of Blackball and Ardgowan, are not of the MacNicol clan. Their name, like that of the English Nicholls, is derived from the original form Nicholas.