

## WHO RESOURCED AND BUILT THE IONA "CATHEDRAL OF THE ISLES"?

Part III - Ian Ross Macdonnell, Australia.

WHO SAVED IONA ABBEY FROM :-  
"IMPOVERISHMENT AND COLLAPSE" BY THE "WICKED,  
NEFARIOUS, PERVERSE , TYRANNICAL" MACKINNONNS, 1350-1450?



### CLAN DONALD NOBLES SAVED IONA ABBEY

IT WAS THEIR DUTY AS THE FOUNDER'S HEIRS :-

1. JOHN MACALASANDAIR - CLAN DONALD'S 1<sup>ST</sup> IONA ABBOT;
2. 'DONALD OF HARLAW' - LORD OF ISLES, WITH HIS 2 SONS:-
3. ANGUS [REDACTED] - "FIRST NATIVE BISHOP OF ISLES"; AND,
4. ALEXANDER MACDONALD - EARL OF ROSS, LORD OF ISLES.

Around 1450, John (II), 4<sup>th</sup> Lord of the Isles (1449-1493), demolished three quarters of the "almost collapsed" abbey church and rebuilt it into a much larger and grander cathedral. The easy, cheap option which an abbot of "extreme poverty" would make of just restoring the small, dilapidated church was not taken. Contemporary records repeatedly show Iona Abbey was 'bankrupted' by the "nefarious" MacKinnons' corruption and excess (they "usurped control of a substantial part of the abbey property" - all RCAHMS quotes). The buildings were collapsing, it was "impoverished in its rents" and the monks could hardly afford to feed themselves. The finance for this ambitious project was largely from John, Lord Macdonald's greatly expanded treasury.<sup>1</sup> Between 1425 and 1476, Alexander, Master of Ross (1425-36), and then the Earls of Ross and Lords of the Isles (building on Donald of Harlaw's earlier groundwork) greatly extended their family's landed wealth and power through increased taxes and rents from their large, extra territories (ie, of Ross and Skye). From 1439 to 1449 (when he died), John (II)'s father Alexander, was also *Justiciar of Scotia*, chief legal officer of Scotland to James II. Their income and wealth may have even doubled in the fifty years from 1426 to 1476 - the year of John's first forfeiture, when he lost the Earldom of Ross.

<sup>1</sup> "It was the founder of a house and his heirs who provided the impetus to build or rebuild, who might contribute ideas, and who furnished resources to finance the project" ('Monastic and Religious Orders'; p.152; Burton, J.; 1994.)

**This is the exact five decades in which the House of Macdonald** • Split The Isles from the Isle of Man diocese (within a year of Donald (II) becoming Lord) • Broke the endemic corruption that was impoverishing and "collapsing" the abbey and recovered usurped property • Annexed extra vicarages and petitioned for twelve canonries/prebends for the abbey • Gifted the status raising corporeal relic and precious reliquary of St Columba • Rebuilt, enlarged and enhanced the entire Iona church. Their first Macdonald Bishop, Angus (I), had earlier moved his *Cathedra* from Skye to Iona Abbey <sup>2</sup> and after the rebuild it effectively rose to cathedral status. The Bishop of The Isles, Angus (I\*) Macdonald, d.1441, was buried "with his crozier and Episcopal habit, south side of the great choir" of the Iona Abbey Church, his 'monastic Cathedral.' (\* Angus (I)'s son Angus (II) also was Bishop of the Isles, 1472–1480.)

**This strategy is firmly centered with the high stakes power play of John (II)'s Treaty of Ardtornish-Westminster with Edward IV in 1461 - John's grand prospect of ruling two thirds of Scotland, that is, all north of the Firth of Forth - the fated expectations of "JOHIS DE YLLE COMIS ROSSIE DOMINI INSULARUM"!**

*"Following the elimination of the Duke of Albany, 1424, the earldom of Ross came into the hands of the Macdonald Lords of the Isles. Alexander, the son of Donald, achieved his late father's ambition. The Earldom carried the ownership of vast properties in western Scotland which resulted in the Mackenzies and other clans becoming vassals instead of kinsmen to the Macdonalds. The new (11th) Earl of Ross continued to hold the title of Lord of the Isles and the Macdonald clan became so powerful that they frequently came into conflict with the King who was relatively powerless against their uprisings."* McKenzie, Alan, FSA Scot. 'History of the Mackenzies'; 2006.

The huge church rebuild was not due to pilgrim income (played a minor role then). It was not due to the new Abbot Dominic Mackenzie – but – it is obvious why a Mackenzie was 'presented' by Donald of Harlaw, who as heir of the founder, had that right of presentation or "assent" to the abbey chapter. Mackenzies of Kintail were of the large earldom of Ross which at that time was a relatively new and "fruitful", albeit contested, territory of Clan Donald. It is so simplistic and highly assumptive to guess that pilgrims were the major source of the funds for the reparation of the "collapsed church" on Iona and that a new Abbot, Dominic (MacKenzie), furnished the resources mainly by a simple one-off special indulgence for feast day pilgrims in 1428 and was the impetus to re-build – as Historic Scotland, other historians and academics guess. They take a prosaic option and it's wrong (marginalising Clan Donald Lords).

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<sup>2</sup> 1433. At the height of Clan Donald's power, *Temporal and Spiritual*, the Bishop of the Isles, Angus (I) Macdonald (grandson of the King of Scots, son of Lord Donald (II) of Harlaw), petitioned and relocated the Episcopal See or Cathedra of The Isles (Bishop's Seat/Throne) from Snizort, Isle of Skye, to Iona. This seat is placed in the Bishop's principal church, which is therefore called, the "BISHOP'S CATHEDRAL". There can be no doubt whatsoever of an intention for a Cathedral at this early stage as in 1433 Bishop Angus Macdonald also petitioned to create 12 canonries and as many prebends, a type of benefice, endowed income [*Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome 1433-1447*, Vol IV, no. 5; 1983]. The members of the chapter of a cathedral are a type of canon - prebendaries had a role in the administration of a cathedral. The obvious burial places for bishops were cathedral churches under their jurisdiction and by long tradition, bishops and archbishops are buried in their cathedrals.

It's not appropriate to simply extrapolate from other countries, regions, periods, different historical, ecclesiastical, socioeconomic and political paradigms.



And what's more important, particularly so in this case, they completely overlook or ignore the obvious revealing events, backed with strong factual evidence, of the overriding historical narrative which clearly displays the systemic and systematic intervention and strong "*conditionality of endowment*" management by the founder's responsible patrilineal successors, the Macdonald Lords of the Isles. Also overlooked was the obvious, practical stages of implementation of an integrated strategic and operational plan by them and their Macdonald Bishops and Abbots to "*secure full control of monastic revenues*", donate the prestigious "*hand of St Columba*" (like the contemporaneous "*hand of St Patrick*" reliquary pictured), make Iona the See of the Isles, then rebuild, enlarge and raise the status of St Mary's church to the Cathedral of the Isles (full chronology next page).

**1390-1480.** "*The Macdonald*" titled heirs ("*2<sup>nd</sup> estate bellatore*", noble Chiefs) and their "*de insulis*" kinsmen elites ("*1<sup>st</sup> estate oratores*", Church prelates) acted as a corporate entity, managing the business of their abbey, protecting their investment and the core "*functional reciprocity*" of the abbey. (To be continued....)

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[FULL CHRONOLOGY - IN BRIEF]

***"IONA CATHEDRAL OF THE ISLES" was raised by CLAN DONALD HIGH CHIEF, LORD OF THE ISLES, "JOHIS DE YLLE COMIS ROSSIE DOMINI INSULARUM", c.1450-80.***

***This political goal was the zenith of a many decades long sequence of connected events.....***

**BY SUCCESSIVE CLAN DONALD CHIEFS (FOUNDER'S HEIRS) and CLAN DONALD ABBOTS, BISHOPS MANAGING  
"CONDITIONALITY OF ENDOWMENT".**

**1386. Donald (II - of Harlaw) becomes Lord of the Isles. Imposed abbey governance restrictions on "corrupt" MacKinnon excess :- "the greatest tyrant who had his lands from the goods of the monastery".**

**1387. Split from the opposing polity of Isle of Man, *The Isles* becomes a separate See under the archdiocese of York.**

**c.1395-1421. 25 YEAR PARTNERSHIP of :- Lord Donald (II) of Harlaw, and  
Clan Donald Prior and Abbot, John MacAllister.**

**c.1390-5. Donald II defeated the "hateful and corrupt" MacKinnons' attempted inside coup of the Lordship (their reaction to his abbey governance). Their Chief was hung; their "wicked" Abbot Finguine "neutered" by Donald and "confined", despite the Pope confirming him "in possession" 1397, but removed 1405 by *commissio privationis*. He was expelled by Prior John MacAllister, obviously Donald's new abbey "Manager", 1395, who then commenced the long, difficult process of tracing and recovery of MacKinnons' "usurped abbey property" and reform of the impoverished, collapsed monastery. He "devoted much of his career to securing full control of the monastic revenues as a preliminary to the repair of the abbey". **THEY BROKE THE CORRUPTION AND NEPOTISM OF THE "NEFARIOUS" FINGUINES (1st, 2nd, 3rd), THE MACKINNON LINEAGE OF ABBOT, SON PRIOR, SON MONK (c.1350 – 1450) and tamed the "moral delinquency of those wicked and perverse noblemen; unlawful occupiers, the greatest tyrants".****

**1412-21. Donald (II), 1386-1421, gifted the prestigious, precious and status raising reliquary of St Columba's body part, via Abbot John MacAllister [clearly not to a MacKinnon].**

**1421. a. Donald (II) annexed three perpetual vicarages to the abbey to boost revenue and fund its reparation.  
b. Donald (II) presents Dominic MacKenzie, from Ross, as the new abbot to continue MacAllister's reforms.**

**1433. Donald II's son, Bishop Angus (I), first "native Bishop of the Isles", removed the *Cathedra, Bishop's Seat, from Skye to Iona. He petitioned for 12 cathedral canons/prepends. He is buried in his 'Monastic Cathedral'.***

**1443. Under Donald II's son Alexander, the power of Clan Donald reached its high tide. He threatened to "*diminish the monastery*" by invoking the serious and real threat of removing the "*relics and bones of his progenitors who are buried therein (Iona) and the precious things which have been given.*" **He was in fact threatening to "shut the place down".** [Why? The local MacKinnons were once again trying to 're-found' and continue their corruption under Finguine MacKinnon (III).] If he removed the bones of his ancestors (to their Oransay or Saddell foundations) the nexus of *divine service* for souls in return for endowments to the abbey was breached and under *functional reciprocity* there was no obligation to continue that recurring income. Alexander died in Dingwall, 1449.**

**1450-80. John (II), 4<sup>th</sup> Lord of the Isles, greatly enlarges and enhances the abbey church to Cathedral standard. It was:- "*So comprehensive a scale as to involve the destruction of nearly three-fourths (3/4s) of the structure.*" (1461 : John's Grand Treaty of Ardtornish–Westminster with England..... What EXPECTATIONS!)**

**1472. Donald of Harlaw's grandson, Angus (II), becomes the Lordship's second Bishop of the Isles.**

**IONA CATHEDRAL IS CLAN DONALD'S LEGACY.  
"THE ROYAL FAMILY OF MACDONALD",  
"FORMERLY KINGS OF THE WESTERN PARTS OF SCOTLAND AND THE ISLES."**

**INTERRUPTIONS : OVER EARLDOM OF ROSS, 1402; KING JAMES I, 1406. Including Battle of Harlaw, 1411; Alexander imprisoned, 1427; Battle of Inverlochy, 1431.**