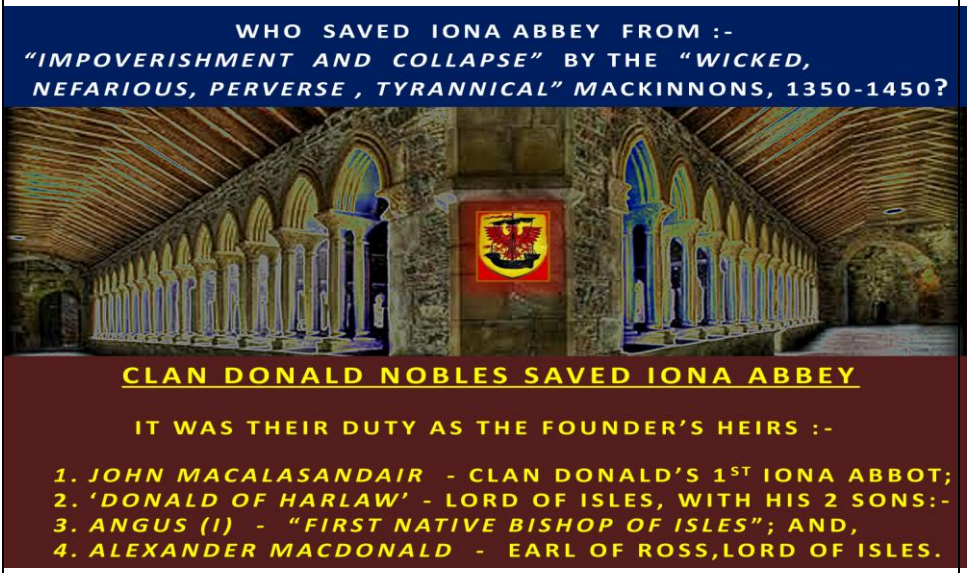
WHO RESOURCED AND BUILT THE IONA "CATHEDRAL OF THE ISLES"?

Part IV - Ian Ross Macdonnell, Australia.



At the time Abbot John MacAllister of Clan Donald died, 1421, Donald of Harlaw's personal "*chaplain and familiar*" was *Adam Dominici* (perpetual vicar of the parish church of *St Eugenius in Rossye,* or Kilviceowin, Ross (actually Kilvickeon, the Ross of Mull). Donald had Adam Dominici sent to the Roman Curia as his Officer in State, ambassador, and had petitioned for a second benefice for his maintenance there[1]. From *Rossye* (this time the actual Earldom of Ross) was *Dominicus Dominici Kenychi* (MacKenzie) who was duly elected in 1421 as the new Abbot of Iona. He was confirmed and blessed by the Bishop of Sodor {Isles} and supplication made to the Apostolic See for the Pope's ratification and provision to the monastery. Dominic MacKenzie was also in Rome with Adam "*awaiting a grace of the Pope*" - he was nearly broke and also asking for "*whatsoever ecclesiastical benefice*" to tide him over.

It is not half obvious here, that the Lord of the Isles, Donald of Harlaw (and later supported by his son Alexander, Earl of Ross) had directed this appointment of Dominic MacKenzie of Kintail, Wester Ross (*ius praesentandi* - see previous, the Lord of the Isles' right of presentation to the Bishop, who was then *'bound to bestow'*).

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[1] McGurk, F. *'Calendar of papal letters to Scotland of Benedict XIII of Avignon, 1394-1419';* pps 269, 275. 1976.

Donald was managing the eight generation inherited enterprise of their Iona Abbey, placing his new man in charge and ensuring that the ground work of the previous Prior Claustral then Abbot, Clan Donald's John MacAlasandar, of recovering the "*better part of its lands and possessions that were preyed upon*" would continue unabated under his new appointee, Abbot Dominic MacKenzie from Ross.

The reason given in the supplication to Rome, 3 Dec 1421, for Lord Donald annexing three perpetual vicarages to Iona Abbey precisely relates to its "*threat of total ruin*" and it was he, the patrilineal heir of the abbey founder and not Abbot Dominic MacKenzie, who had the power and was making a financial decision to fund recovery because - "... *the monastery of Iona, Order of St Benedict, Sodor (Isles) Diocese, is so collapsed and impoverished in its buildings and rents that it is sinking to irreparable ruin, unless the Pope in his clemency provide an opportune remedy, especially because the revenues of the monastery do not suffice for its reparation..*" [2] In fact, Abbot MacKenzie supplicated to Rome in Nov 1421 that he could not be "*fittingly sustained*" by the Abbey and asked that "*the Pope to dispense him to rule and govern a parish church or its perpetual vicarage"* until such time as he may be "*sustained from the fruits of the monastery*". [3]

Kings were the principal abbey builders and re-builders, not abbots. They are the King's master masons or churchwrights, not the abbot's. It was King Henry III of England who rebuilt almost the entire Westminster abbey costing him more than £41,000, the second most expensive building project in medieval England. It was not the abbot! He is a big stakeholder obviously, having his monastery to run.

Why is it such a problematic concept to grasp, or accept, for the western isles when the paradigm is *pris pour acquis* in the rest of Scotland and England, Ireland, Wales? "*Indeed, the contribution of the native elements of Scotland in this respect remains an almost unwritten Chapter in the ecclesiastical history of Scotland*" [4]. For example :-

- "*Edward the Confessor's wife, Edith,* ***financed the rebuild*** *of Wilton nunnery*";
- *(St) Margaret, mother of David I, was provided with a group of Benedictine monks by the Archbishop of Canterbury* "***for the church she built*** *at Dunfermline";* 1072;
- "*It was King David I who* ***rebuilt the Abbey*** *as a much larger and more magnificent structure*";
- *"King Edgar of Scotland had granted the land of Coldingham to the Church of Durham in 1098, and a church was* ***constructed by him*** *and presented in 1100";*
- *"****Building of the (Holyrood) Abbey Church*** *began shortly after its foundation in 1128 by David I for the Augustinian Canons";* ● Duncan, Earl of Carrick "***superintended the erection of the structure"*** - Crossraguel Abbey, Ayrshire; c1244-50.

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[2] Lindsay, ER. *'Calendar of Scottish supplications to Rome* (CSSR); *1418-1422'*; p.271. 1934.
[3] Ibid (CSSR above); p.265.
[4] MacDonald RA; 1995. "*Scoto-Norse Kings and the Reformed Religious Orders". 'Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies', Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pps. 187-219.*

I could provide copious other examples to prove this point. It is undeniable, it was *not* the Iona Abbot who:-

- raised the building funds
- re-built the church into a cathedral
- "*furnished resources to finance the project*";
- "*provided the impetus to build or rebuild*".

"If the church connected with the patronage is threatened with total ruin, or the endowment with a deficit, if those first bound to restore it are not at hand, ***the bishop*** *is to exhort* ***the patron*** **(ie, the founder's heir/s***) to rebuild* (*reœdificandum*) *or renew the endowment (ad redotandum*)" - The Catholic Encyclopaedia. And in this context, the abbey was not only physically decayed but also in financial ruin with meagre income and possessions - "*The monastery was collapsed, impoverished in its rents and of extreme poverty"; "Almost destroyed in its building and rents"*. And the "*first bound*" was the Iona Abbot and his obedientaries who were "*not at hand*" - they were "*impoverished*". Case in point, 1426 :- **1**. Who was the Bishop? - **Angus Macdonald, son of Donald [5]. 2.** Who was the Patron that Bishop Angus was exhorting? - **His grandfather, Alexander Macdonald, Lord of the Isles, Earl of Ross.**

If it was so simple and so easy to raise all the necessary funds to repair the "collapsed monastery" by petitioning the Pope to grant an indulgence of three years off purgatory to all pilgrims visiting Iona on St Columba's feast day (9 June) and receive their donations (as commonly supposed and written), then why didn't the previous MacKinnon Abbots ever do it? They didn't even try, as Vatican records prove (eg, Calendars of Scottish Supplications to Rome, CSSR). What's more, any pilgrim collection via this 'exit purgatory fast lane' indulgence would have been only a fraction of the enormous cost of replacing, enlarging and enhancing almost the entire existing church, including the central crossing tower (see the comparative plans at the end).

And, in any case, the contemporary 15th century Vatican records prove that through the "*moral delinquency of these wicked and perverse noblemen" – "a bad tree cannot bear good fruit*", these particular period MacKinnons, "[*'unlawful'*] *Abbots charged with exploiting their position in favour of their kinsmen"*, would ***not*** have spent the donations on restoration, but on themselves! That is for example, on their concubines, "*dowering them large on goods of the monastery*". [6]

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[5] (Angus)"The Bishop of Sodor (Isles) sat in Parliament , 10March, 1429-30 (Acts of Parliament; ii. 28)". "*The bishops of Scotland: being notes on the lives of all the bishops, under each of the sees, prior to the reformation*"; Dowden, John, Bishop of Edinburgh; 1912.

[6] *1405 - "To the bishops of Glasgow and Dunkeld. Mandate to summon Fingon* (MacKinnon), *abbot of Hy (Iona), Sodor diocese, and to hear charges brought against him by John Goffredi* (a Clan Donald MacAllister ("*Goffredus Angusii called MacAlasandar, doncel* (noble)" - g/grandson of the 3rd Macdonald Chief,

As well, the MacKinnons "*usurped control of a substantial part of the Abbey property*" and "*had their lands from the goods of the monastery*" by corruptly siphoning off the abbey's income from the lands which were endowed, then re-endowed/confirmed ("*carta confirmationis*"} and also added to over the centuries, by whom? By the Macdonald Lords of the Isles – lands of the Clan Donald! For example, Donald of Harlaw (1386-1421) : "*gave lands to the monastery of Iona, and every immunity which the monastery of Iona has from his ancestors over the centuries*" [by MacMhuirich, Clan Donald's hereditary bards for 500 years].

Supplications to the Vatican also prove that it was Donald of Harlaw, *not* the abbot, who also ensured the abbey would have some additional revenue coming in by "uniting" the best part of the "fruits", income, of three perpetual vicarages to the abbey - leaving a poorly paid "*temporal vicar, or more truly a hiring*" for the cure of the souls of the three very unimpressed communities (Sorobie, Tiree, Kilfinichin - south-western parts of Mull; Kilcolmkill, Quinish, Mull district), that is, mainly from the MacKinnons who had mainly caused the decay and impoverishment of the abbey in the first place.

It was John Macdonald, Donald's grandson, who greatly enlarged and enhanced the "*collapsed, impoverished*" Abbey church (c.1450-1480),[7] using none other than CLAN DONALD'S centuries-old hereditary churchwrights (architect/builder), chief masons and secretaries, the renowned O'Brolchans of St Columba's Derry, "*Chief Artificers of Ireland*". [8]

Alexander Og, k.1299)*, prior claustral of the monastery, to the effect that* ***Fingon had lived with concubines, had wasted the monastery's goods, had used these goods as dowries for three daughters by a concubine, and had deprived the monastery of 400 merks sterling worth of goods****."* Reg Aven 319, 711-711V; McGurk, F. *'Calendar of papal letters to Scotland of Benedict XIII of Avignon, 1394-1419';* pp144 (and pps 51,56). 1976.

NB : Iona Abbot John Goffredi MacAlasandar above, had a brother Angusii Goffredi whose son Alexander Angusii and his son Alexander II were both Abbots of Clan Donald's Saddell Abbey, 1433 - 1456 and 1499 to the abbey's closure in c.1508, respectively (stripped by Earl of Argyll).

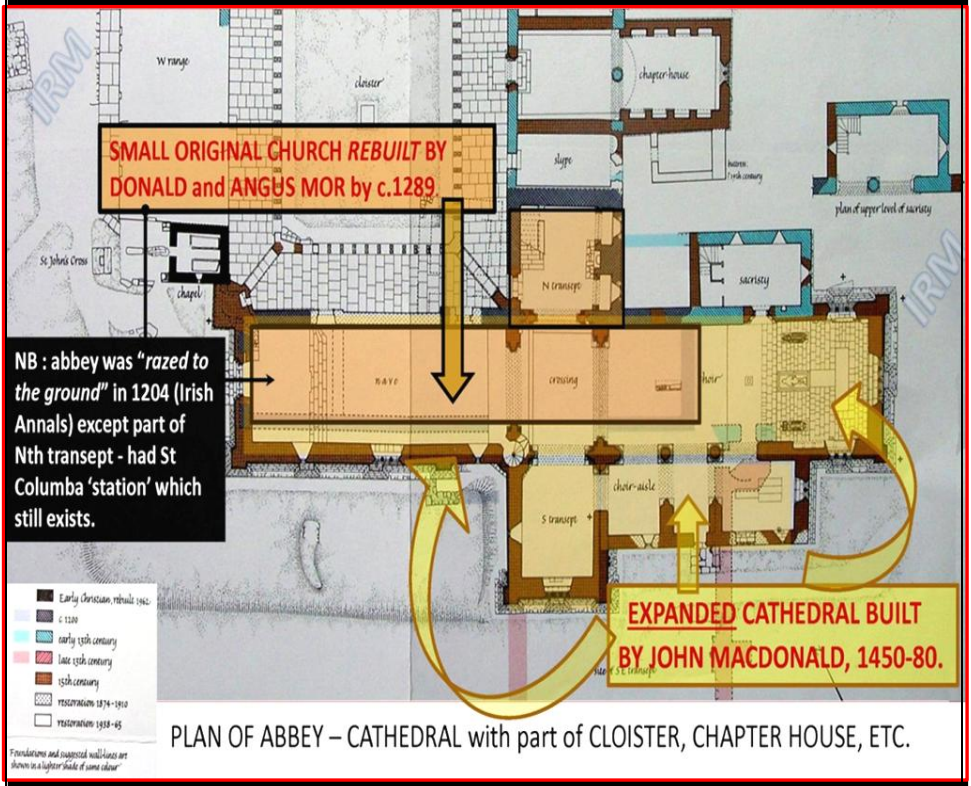
[7] "***The patron*** *has the subsidiary duty of building*" (re-iteration at the reforming Council of Trent, Sess. XXI, "de ref.", c. vii) - "*at one's private expense* (*aedificatio)*"; 1545-63 .

[8] ● NB : **1266** treaty of Perth –'sovereignty' of the Hebrides passed from Norway to Scotland pushing the Clan Donald even closer back to Ireland.

● Somerled and clan Donald's dominant interaction was with the Northern Uí Neill of N/W Ireland before the fall of lordship, 1493 (not Norway). That is, with Gaelic Derry, with the dominant O'Neill Kings of Tyrone and their sub-kings the Ó Catháins (O'Cahen; O'Kane), Ó Domnailles, and Ó Brolcháns. [The MacDonnells of Dunyvaig and the Glens were not materially established in the east, in Antrim, until very late in the 15th century.]

● Angus Og reconnected his dynasty's ancient Irish connections and cemented the more recent MacSomerled alliance with the Lords of Derry, by marriage to Áine Ó Catháin, in the early 14th century at Limavady, Tir Keeran, near Loch Foyle, Ulster. Áine, a Derry royal, was first married to The (Great) O'Neill. It will surprise many in Clan Donald that the mother of John, 1st Lord of the Isles, was Irish (Áine) and that he had a royal O'Neill half-brother. And also that Angus Og's sister married Brian O'Neill, King of Tyrone, c.1300. John and Áine travelled regularly to N/W Ireland.

John's new works were of "*so comprehensive a scale as to involve the destruction of nearly three-fourths of the structure*." "***Donaldus O Brolchan fecit hoc opus***"; 'Donal O Brolchan made this work', incised on the capital of the south pier, east crossing, late 15th century. ... [cont.; next is the final.]



PLAN OF ABBEY – CATHEDRAL with part of CLOISTER, CHAPTER HOUSE, ETC.