



The Lords of the Isles

Somerled, who flourished in the 12th century, was the progenitor of the Clan Donald (Macdonalds). In his day the Scottish Hebrides were under the rule of the King of Man (The Island of Man) as a vassal of the King of Norway. Somerled married the daughter (Ragnhildi) of the King of Man and subsequently laid claim to the Western Isles on behalf of his and her eldest son and conquered them and drove the King into exile. He established a dynasty that became known as 'The Lords of the Isles'.

This was a turbulent period of Scottish history and the inhabitants of these Islands contributed their fair share to the inter-tribal warfare and routine pillage of the times.

It was however a confident period in the history of the 'Gaidhealtachd' and the Islands. There was a gradual spread of the Church as well as merchant trading and the establishment of a rough and ready system of representation through the hierarchy of lesser chiefs. This was also a period that saw developments in ecclesiastic and defensive architecture.

The power of the Lordship of the Isles came to an end in 1483 when King James IV of Scotland took the opportunity afforded by an enfeebled and aged Lord of the Isles to assert his military and political authority by the forfeiture of the title Lord of the Isles, and the effective inclusion of the Western Isles within the realm of Scotland.

With the fall of the Lordship also went the cultural patronage and support that they gave to the Church and to followers such as pipers and poets who had been retained for their artistic services as well as physicians etc. In the case of the Lords of the Isles their hereditary physicians were members of the Beaton family. These physicians were learned in the best contemporary medicinal science of the time. Some of their learned treatises were written in Gaelic but quoted Greek and Arabic sources. In due course they began to be superseded by trained doctors but the use of charms lingered on for a while.

The power vacuum that was created by the fall of the Lords of the Isles, led to a growth in independence of the lesser chiefs. That strengthened the development of the Clan system which in turn was broken up at the time of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745.

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