



[Coinneach Bàn Mackenzie and the Querns (c 1719)]

I am indebted to Mr Donald Mackay, Caversta for relating to me a story of this nature about a tacksman that was at Laxay, Lochs around the year 1719 when William Mackenzie 'Uilleam Dubh' Seaforth was the landlord. The tacksman's name was 'Coinneach Bàn', Kenneth Mackenzie. He had a mill at Laxay, and it was said it was the first mill in Lochs. Kenneth must have had authority over the surrounding crofters including those at Keose, and he insisted that they sent their grain to his mill for grinding. The crofters finding the charges at the mill too steep reverted to their querns and Kenneth promptly went round and collected all the querns he could find, and dumped them in the sea at the 'Poll Gorm' at the estuary of the Laxay river.

Despite Kenneth's unusual physique (he was nearly 7 feet tall and an accomplished swordsman) there was one quern in Keose that was denied to him, and it belonged to the blacksmith at Keose who apparently was more than a match for the tacksman. On hearing that the men of Keose including the blacksmith was at 'Eilean Calum Chille', St Columba's Isle, in Loch Erisort at an internment, Kenneth Bàn took advantage of the absence of the blacksmith and collected his quern. He must have delayed unduly, and when the boat with the men of Keose approached the shore on their return the tacksman was seen on his way to the blacksmith's quern. The blacksmith made off after the tacksman, and to the cries of his comrades to return and assist them to haul the boat up on the beach, he called out to leave it because it might be required tomorrow to take either him or the tacksman to Eilean Calum Chille (the cemetery).

When Coinneach Bàn saw the blacksmith approaching he dumped the quern and took off. The blacksmith must have been some man when Coinneach Bàn felt himself unable to hold his own with him, because on another occasion the same tacksman was attacked in the wilds of Wester Ross when he was on his way to pay his rent at Brahan Castle (Kenneth was not on good terms with Zachary Macaulay, the Mackenzie factor in Lewis at the time and it is said it was the factor that arranged the attack on the life of Coinneach Bàn). He drew his sword and of the three men who attacked him two were killed and the third lost his ear before he escaped. Years later a traveller came to the door of Kenneth at Laxay and on noticing that he only had one ear Kenneth inquired how he came to be minus an ear. The traveller related his story of the wars but Kenneth asked him was he sure he did not come to lose his ear in Wester Ross. The traveller had to admit that he did, and Kenneth holding out his right hand said to the traveller, 'this is the hand that cut off your ear'.

I inquired from Hector Macdonald, 18 Laxay if he heard of a tradition of querns being dumped in the sea at Laxay, and he immediately confirmed that he used to hear from the old folk that the querns were in fact dumped at the 'Poll Gorm' at the estuary of the Laxay River.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Coinneach Bàn Mackenzie - Tacksman at Laxay

Location in physical archive: Series K, File 1, Section 16

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/9/1

© Angus Macleod Archive

See also Hebridean Connections, for more information about Coinneach Bàn Mackenzie:

<http://www.hebrideanconnections.com/Details.aspx?subjectid=65008>