

Duncan Mac Crinan (Duncan I King of Scotland, 'Ilgairachd' - The ill blooded or Vicious)
THE TRUE STORY.

I have recently been exchanging correspondence with the BBC on the content of their history programmes including those by Michael Schama. Macbeth has been given the usual dismissive working over with many of the hoary old lies and half-truths being trotted out again. Unfortunately William Shakespeare's play is inextricably linked in many minds as historical fact and therefore, I am writing my own little history entitled **MacBeath Mac Finlay King of Scots.**

May I introduce you to one of the main characters in this great story? Alas there are no Prophecies of Doom, Witches, Fictional characters which Raphael Holinshead's "The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland", published in 1577 made mention of. Various churchmen some 400 years afterwards, and Shakespeare added these in for dramatic effect. There are Heroes and villains aplenty, We travel to many places to seek out information on these figures from our millennial past, Atholl for the Scottish Chronicles and the Annals of Tigernach, to Ulster for the Annals of Ulster, to Orkney for the 'Orkneyingasaga', to Iceland for their sagas, to Winchester to the Anglo Saxon chronicles, to Durham for 'the annals of the See of Durham' to Rome for the Records of the Vatican and lastly to the great oral tradition of Gaeldom itself. From all these sources we weave a great tapestry for your enlightenment.

Duncan I King of Scotland, Donnochadh Mac Crinan ('Ilgairachd' - The ill blooded or Vicious) B 1004 - Died 1040 aged 36. Unlike Shakespeare's meek, wise and venerable old man, in real life he was a vicious, evil, militarily incompetent, headstrong, impetuous, spoiled young man whose six years of kingship brought neither glory to the reputation of Scotland nor to his ancient family. Duncan had usurped the throne by an edict of Malcolm II, having himself illegally crowned whilst many of the Mormaors who should have been consulted were attending the funeral of his grandfather King Malcolm II on Iona. This happening greatly displeased the Mormaors no end, as this was contrary to the ancient laws of Tanistry. Mac Beath had a much better claim, as far as strict descent was concerned, as also did his wife, Princess Gruoch, who was his cousin. (Not an unusual married relationship in those days). Both Mac Beath and his wife were directly descended from Kenneth MacAlpin.

Once he was crowned king of Scots, Duncan embarked on a policy of eliminating anyone who might have a claim to the Throne. According to Verbal gaidhlig tradition, in early 1035 Mac Beath was poisoned by an unknown hand suspected to be Duncan's. He was gravely ill, but recovered after a while due to a local Ceill De priest diagnosing meiklewort poisoning and administering an antidote. Then followed a series of ill judged military adventures with the avowed purpose of crushing the dissenters. The most powerful of these was the Gael- Norseman Thorfinn Sigurdson, Earl of Orkney and Shetland, and Mormaor of Caithness. In early 1035, Thorfinn was busy fighting in Galloway and thinking that Thorfinn was well out of the way Duncan gathered his Eastern Mormaors galley fleets together, raised an army of over 3000 men mostly from the Mortuath's of Buchan and Mar, Fortrenn and Fife, under the Command of Matain Mac Caerill thane of Buchan. Matain then sailed off to invade Caithness to wrest it from Thorfinn's control. If the venture were successful then Duncan would appoint

Matain Mac Caerill (his sisters husband,) to be Mormaor of Caithness. (Quite a practicable proposition as Caithness is only 84 Nautical miles by sea from Kinnaird (Fraserburgh). Thorfinn got wind of this attack and sailed his fleet 400 miles from Kirk Cuthbert (Kirkcubright) in Galloway to Caithness in the incredible time of Three days and two nights, landing with his army of 2000 men at Thurso. He found that Matain Mac Caerill had split his forces to go raiding and the smaller force had been heavily defeated by a scratch force of some 400 men from Orkney led by Thorkell Fosterer. Matain escaped the rout to rejoin his larger raiding force that was burning, slaying and laying waste Thorfinn's subjects, only to meet up with a very angry Thorfinn at Reay (Modern Dounreay). In the ensuing battle Matain was slain along with all of his men. Thorfinn took no prisoners!

One would think that Duncan had learned his lesson, but no! In July 1035 Norsemen at Torfness spotted a fleet of 11 very large war galleys (with nearly 2,600 Scottish levies and Danish mercenaries plus 200 horses) was heading north. Duncan had borrowed the 11 large Galleys (capable of transporting horses) from his wife Sybilla's father, the Dane Earl Siward in northern England along with their shipmasters and crews. Thorfinn's governor in Torfness (Thorkell Fosterer) sent out several longships to shadow this fleet and sent off a swift longship to Orkney ahead of the invading fleet to warn Thorfinn. Duncan may have thought that Thorfinn was gravely weakened by his losses in Caithness and decided to strike whilst he could.

Thorfinn with six longships was patrolling a line from the Isle of Copinsay to Deerness located on the eastern extremity of the Orkney main island when the 11 War Galleys came in Sight. The 'Orkneyingasaga' gives a graphic account of the sea fight in which the heavily outnumbered Thorfinn captured or sank 6 of the war galleys, during which sea battle, Thorfinn grappled and boarded King Duncan's ship. Duncan fled to another ship lying alongside and ordered his 5 surviving ships to retreat homewards. The battered and damaged survivors eventually landed in Lothian. Thorfinn did not take this lying down. He assembled a fleet and manned it with 3000 Orcadians and Shetlanders to invade the East coast of Scotland and exact his revenge and punish the Mormaors who had supported Duncan with Men and money. There was great destruction and loss of life before Thorfinn laden with Plunder returned to Orkney.

After these failed attempts Duncan was forced to call a halt except for putting down small rebellions, as the whole of Scotland was seething with discontent at his arbitrary and unjust rule. The ravaged mortuaths needed time to recover from Thorfinn's depredations and Duncan was unable to mount any further large-scale attacks until the winter of 1038 when he made a series of rieving forays into Northumbria to amass some plunder to replenish his treasury and keep his supporters happy.

In 1039, the levels of unrest and rebellion in Scotland were so severe that Duncan decided to embark on a major military Adventure to annex Northumbria and Durham to the Scottish crown. If this succeeded then Duncan would have gained in authority and could then tighten his grip on his Mormaors and Thaners. This adventure went ahead completely against the advice of His Mormaors and military advisors. Thane Cormac of Glamis, Scotland's foremost and most experienced soldier argued against and in this he was backed up by most of the

Leaders.

Duncan invaded Northumbria and attacked Durham. He besieged Durham itself for two whole weeks, where Earl Eadulf of Bernicia was holding out. Earl Siward of Northumbria was not idle and landed a strong army along the banks of the River Wear and attacked the Scots from behind, forcing them to retreat in disorder all the way back to the Merse. Siward inflicted such heavy casualties that over 90% of the Scottish army were wiped out! Only Duncan and the Scots mounted on horses managed to fight their way out of the trap. Abandoning the foot soldiers to their fate, He bolted for safety!

The Mormaors held Duncan directly responsible for the conduct of this shameful, poorly planned and executed campaign. News of his disastrous and humiliating defeat had preceded him on his return to Scotland and in no time he was faced with a revolt among the northern Mormaors and Thanes. They wanted to replace him ('To Putt hyme down' wrote the 13th century chronicler) and elect Mac Beath as king. Instead Duncan decided to finally eliminate Mac Beath his cousin, Mormaor of Moray, Earl Thorfinn Sigurdson of Orkney and any others who were a possible threat to him. During the remainder of the Year, Duncan enlisted the aid of King Eachmarcach of Dublin who turned up with 2600 Irish and Norse mercenaries. A further 600 Danes, with at least 500 Saxon and Northumbrian mercenaries. He called for more levies from his Mortuaths but many of them were if not in open revolt, refusing to send any more men.

In pursuance of this aim in 1040, Duncan Invaded Moray with an army conservatively estimated as being over 5000 men, savagely laying waste to the land and its people. He also attempted to capture Torfness (Modern Burghead) from Thorfinn Sigurdson (The raven Feeder) who was half brother to Mac Beath by mounting a joint Seaborne and landward pincer movement on the Citadel. Mac Beath enlisted the help of Thorfinn, and raised a small army of Moraymen and Orcadians at short notice. His forces were only half the size of Duncan's army. Duncan again showed his military ineptitude by dividing his forces and detaching the greater part by sea under his direct command to besiege Torfness and the remainder to cross the River Spey to attack Mac Beath's Hall house at Spynie and Kill Mac Beath and his family. This division of forces was disastrous. On the 14th of August 1040, his Torfness army under Mormaor Gartnait of Mar was almost wiped out by Thorfinn's 2,400 Orcadians and Gartnait was killed along with a great number of the Irish and Foreign mercenaries. Thorfinn also suffered heavy casualties and had Duncan not divided his forces then Thorfinn would have been overwhelmed.

The smaller force under King Eachmarcach of Dublin was hotly engaged by the much smaller fighting forces of the Loyal Thanes of Brodie and Oykeell. They fought a dogged fighting retreat from the Spey towards the River Lossie and sent word to Mac Beath that they could not hold Eachmarcach back for much longer. Mac Beath launched his forces in a forced march overnight and occupied the bank of the River Lossie at the point where it became fordable around the tidal salt flats. There Mac Beath held the line. Before Eachmarcach could make any further moves, a courier brought the news that King Duncan had been heavily defeated outside Torfness and that he was seen to be fleeing with about 500 men in the direction of Spynie (perhaps to wreak revenge on Mac Beath's family? or to join up with Eachmarcach?)

Mac Beath took a small force of 300 mounted men to intercept Duncan and caught up with him near to Spynie. Duncan with double the force took the initiative by attacking first and a full-scale melee took place. Mac Beath immediately made for Duncan and cut his way through to him, receiving a number of wounds in the process. Finally Mac Beath managed to fell Duncan and once it was seen that Duncan had fallen, Duncan's men lost heart and picking up their seriously wounded king, they rode off. At a place called Bothgobhann (Hut of the Smith - Smithy) near Spynie, Duncan was given shelter and treatment to stop the haemorrhaging. To no avail, some time later during the night Duncan died of his wounds. The location can be found at a place called Pitgavenny near Elgin on the landranger sheet 28, gridref 242652.

The Following day, Cormac Thane of Glamis arrived under a flag of truce and to tell Mac Beath that He was now King by popular acclaim. Duncan's army or what was left of it was dispersed and sent homewards. Duncan's body was taken to Iona for burial, ironically in one of Thorfinn's Longships. At Iona a meeting of all the Mormaors except for Crinan Mormaor of Atholl, (Hereditary Abbot of Dunkeld who was Duncan 1st's father) confirmed that Mac Beath was duly elected King per the ancient laws of Tanistry.

I trust that the fog of 1000 years of half-truths, myths, lies and propaganda has been dispersed and Duncan 1st has been revealed in his true colours. The history of Mac Beath (one of Scotland's greatest kings) is being prepared and will be with you shortly.

Niall U'Aislainn.

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