

Jump where the wall is lowest

version 4 – January 2018

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This is one of a series of interconnected research notes. They can be found in Small Print on the left of the homepage. Of most relevance to this article are:-

- C10 – [‘Setting the Scene’](#) – Essential reading
- F20 – [‘MacLean Chiefs – Duart line’](#) - There have been 28 Chiefs. The Ardgour line branched off during the time of the 7th Chief – Lachlan Bronneach who was the father of Donald (‘The Hunter’).
- F30 – [‘MacLean Lairds of Ardgour’](#) - These lairds have formed an unbroken line for six centuries. Donald (‘The Hunter’) was the first in 1420 and the current laird is Robin 18th.

We can be proud of this heritage, but it began in brutal times when land could be seized by force. There are many versions of the events which resulted in the MacLeans taking over Ardgour. The accounts are generally consistent with each other but differ in ways which make each of them worth telling. There are sufficient differences to indicate that they have not copied from each other, and enough common threads to indicate that the truth must lie somewhere within all these stories.

Version 1 – from Wikipedia

When of age to bear arms, Donald McLean was taken by his grandfather to the Castle of Ardtornish in Morvern, where MacDonald of the Isles then resided, and asked MacDonald to give him some living, as he was a promising youth.

MacMaster, Laird of Ardgour had upset MacDonald, and he took the opportunity to gain revenge by suggesting Donald and his maternal grandfather (MacEarchorn) should leap the dyke where it was lowest. They took the hint, went to Ardgour, attacked MacMaster, took him and his son and killed them.

Chief McMaster's eldest son had escaped and fled to Corran Ferry hoping to be taken across to the other side. However, MacGurraich, the ferryman, was out fishing and responded to the call to come ashore with "The 'cuddies' are taking too well to-night". [He ignored McMaster's cries of help as if they were donkeys braying]. The pursuing Macleans soon caught and killed McMaster's son. MacLean then killed the ferryman for his duplicity and disloyalty and hung him using his oars as a scaffold.

Version 2 - from Douglas MacLean in 1975 (BRB p4)

In the year 1420 Donald MacLean, his wife and family were living in a cave in North West Scotland. He approached the Lord of the Isles and asked that he be rewarded for fighting that he had done on behalf of him. On being asked what reward he desired Donald answered, "Some land." The lord of the Isles answered somewhat enigmatically, "Jump where the wall is lowest". Donald wondered what was meant. Searching around he found that the 100,000 acre estate of Ardgour was weakly held by Clan McMaster who was an elderly man.

Donald and his followers raided Ardgour and McMaster was slain and his son was captured and hanged from a nearby tree. The ferryman was captured too and begged for mercy saying, "I did not help McMaster." Donald's motto was "Victory or death." He told the ferryman, "Some day my enemies might catch up to me, and I might wish you to row me over the ferry. The man who is not for me is against me." So, they hanged the ferryman too.

Version 3 – from 'A History of Clan MacLean' by JP McLean in 1889, p265

In his attack upon MacMaster's house by night, (Donald) was greatly assisted by his maternal grandfather. The MacMasters of that vicinity were not wholly extirpated, for an old woman of that tribe composed the rhyme —

<i>" Nam biod Mac-Mhic-Eoghainn's Mac-Mhic Eachainn</i>	If Ardgour and Kingerloch
<i>Mar chombla air aon sgeir,</i>	Were together on a rock in the sea,
<i>Cha tugainn-sa dbeth Mac-Mhic-Eachinn,</i>	I would not take Kingerloch off it,
<i>'S dh' fhagairm Mac-Mhic-Eoghainn air."</i>	And I would leave Ardgour on it.

Version 4 – from 'Scotland's Rainbow West', by J. J. Bell, published 1933 (BRB p5)

MacMasters, the owner in 1420, had annoyed the Lord of the Isles, MacDonald. A grandson of MacLean of Duart, Island of Mull, was visiting Ireland when he learned that this MacDonald (his kinsman - MacLean's grandmother was of the MacDonald Clan) was giving land away. In my version, he was Ewen, not Donald, and he hastened back to his galley but on arrival back in Scotland he found he was too late, no land remained.

However, the Lord of the Isles said so brave a young man deserved some land and why not help himself. When Ewen enquired "Where?" MacDonald murmured "Fuich", the old name for Ardgour territory. With less than a score of followers Ewen sailed up Loch Linhe at night and arrived at Ardgour House, not far from the three story one of the present, at midnight. He was refused admittance, so Ewen killed him on the spot and dealt with the son later. So, all of Ardgour passed from MacMasters to McLeans.

Version 5 – from a pamphlet about the Ardgour Estate - <http://ardgourestate.co.uk/ardgour-estate>

Young Donald was a favourite of the MacDonald Lord of the Isles, who at that time ruled the Western Seaboard of Scotland like a king. When Donald asked him for land, the Lord of the Isles said somewhat elliptically 'jump where the dyke is lowest'. Donald took this to mean the lands of Ardgour, which were in the hands of Clan MacMaster, a weak, impoverished clan.

Donald set sail from Mull with three galleys. Among his followers was a group of Boyds; descendants of this family live in Ardgour today. The galleys beached just before the Corran Narrows, and the invaders began their slaughter of the hapless MacMasters. The MacMaster Chief escaped the carnage, and ran down to the ferry. The ferryman, out fishing in the loch, refused to acknowledge his Chief's desperate calls. When Donald arrived in search of MacMaster, the ferryman announced proudly that he had refused him passage. Donald said, 'any man who is not loyal to his chief is not worthy of life', and the ferryman was hanged from his own oars.

Version 6 – from 'The Clan Gillean' by Rev A McLean Sinclair in 1899, p305

With the consent of the Lord of the Isles (Donald) attacked the Macmasters of Ardgour, killed their Chief and his son, and took possession of their lands. In this daring act he was assisted by Maclean of Kingerloch.

Version 7 – from ‘Bygone Lochaber’, by Sommerled MacMillan in 1971, p99

One night Donald MacLean and a band of ruffians called at MacMaster's house, loudly demanding food, and when old MacMaster gave them a fiery rebuff they used this refusal as a pretext for murdering him. The Chief's eldest son made his escape from the house to Corran Ferry, but the ferryman named MacGurraclaich was out fishing at the time, and when young MacMaster shouted to him to come ashore and take him to the other side he received this callous reply: "*Ta iad gabhail ro-mhath air na cudainnean an nochd*" ("The 'cuddies' are taking too well to-night"). Young MacMaster was being hotly pursued and was forced to flee to a recess in the glen, but was soon discovered by the MacLeans who murdered him on the spot. A cairn was erected over his grave and is believed to be still standing. When MacGurraclaich came ashore at Kilvaodan, not far from the Red Rocks, he greeted the murderer with these words: "*Nach math rinn mi sin, a MhicGhill 'eathain!*" ("Isn't it well I did that, MacLean!"). MacLean's answer, however, put a different complexion on the ferryman's boastful speech and said: "*O, seadh, ach dh'fhàg thu a bheatha air mo làimhsa, agus nam bitheadh cothrom agad dheanadh tu a' cheart cleas orm-sa*" ("O, yes, but you left his life on my hand, and if you had been given an opportunity you would have played the same trick on me")! Forthwith, MacLean ordered his men to seize MacGurraclaich, and using the oars as a temporary scaffold they hanged him on the spot.

A MacMaster poetess has expressed herself in satirical language as she poured out contempt upon MacLean of Kingairloch and Donald MacLean of Ardgour on learning that they had murdered her chief. One verse is as follows:-

<i>Nam bitheadh Mac Mhic Eo'ghainn 's Mac Mhic Eachainn</i>	If Ewen's grandson and Hector's grandson
<i>Mar chòmhlà air aon sgeir;</i>	Were together on one 'sgeir' (Skerry)
<i>Cha tugainn-sa Mac Mhic Eachainn,</i>	I would not take the grandson of Hector,
<i>'S dh'fhagainn Mac Mhic Eo'ghainn air."</i>	And I would leave Ewen's grandson there.

Version 8 – from ‘A Genealogical Account of the Ffamily of McLean, by Alexander MacLean, 13th Laird Ardgour in 1872, pp56&64 (some minor modernization of spelling and grammar have been applied

Donald MacLean Bronach, third MacLean of Duart by daughter of MacEarchorn Laird of Kingerloch was brought up in his grandfather's house at Kingerloch, and when of age to bear arms, was carried by his grandfather to the Castle of Ardtornish in Morven, where MacDonald of the Isles then resided. His grandfather desired MacDonald to give Donald some living, as he was a promising youth. At that time one MacMaster was Laird of Ardgour at whom MacDonald had a pique and took this opportunity to vent it. He told MacEarchorn and his grandson he might leap the Dyke where it was lowest; they took the hint, went to Ardgour, attacked MacMaster, took him and his son (being his only child) and killed them. They took immediate possession of Ardgour, which MacDonald confirmed by granting the young man a Charter; and afterwards upon MacDonald's forfeiture was ratified by the King.

Version 9 – from “Warriors & Priests: The History of the Clan Maclean 1330-1570’ by Nicholas Maclean-Bristol

Donald Maclean was brought up amongst his mother's kin. According to the traditional account, Donald obtained Ardgour when its previous owner insulted to Lord of the Isles. Apparently, the latter was ill at Ardtornish with an upset stomach which caused him 'not to smell well'. The barons of the isles visited him and were sitting in his room when they 'were offended by a noisome smell'. Thinking the smell was caused by the dogs in the room, they drove them out. However, MacMaster, MacInnes of Ardgour, suspected the truth. He whispered 'is feard cuideachd cu', 'it is the man not the dog'. MacDonald overheard him and was furious. He determined to avenge the insult. The instrument was the landless Donald, who was encouraged 'to leap the dyke where it was lowest'. Maclean took the hint and, helped by his mother's kinsmen, he 'fell upon MacMaster, killed him, and his eldest son and seized Ardgour'".

Version 10 – from Timothy Pont in the 1580s and 1590s (per National Library of Scotland) – pages 86v-87r

Ardgaur the nixt inhabitants were a race called clan Maister, wherof the cheef man having offended his Lord Mack-oneil who therwpon gave it to some(?) of Mac-Lean.

= The next inhabitants dwelling in Ardgour were a race called clan McMaster, whose chief offended his Lord MacDonald who thus gave it to the MacLeans.

The best version of all is by Fiona MacLean in a chapter, 'The MacLeans Seize Ardgour' (p22), in her book 'Death or Victory – Tales of Clan Maclean' which can be obtained through www.maclean.org

These notes were prepared by Don Gordon in January 2018. Your suggestions are welcome via 'Contact us' in www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com.