

Introduction

A Celtic Dirk at Scotland's Back? The Lordship of the Isles in Mainstream Scottish Historiography since 1828

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This volume of essays has its origin in a chance conversation in 1993 in which it emerged that no event had been organised to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles by King James IV of Scotland. The result was a small academic conference the following year based at Ballygrant on Islay, close to the former symbolic centre of the Lordship at Finlaggan, and plans to bring the papers from that conference together as a published collection. That plan never matured and the conference papers which represented the contribution of different disciplines to the study of the MacDonald Lordship mainly found homes in academic journals or were incorporated into larger research publications. Individually, none came close to offering the chronological breadth or disciplinary breadth that the multi-author collection had promised and, while in the last two decades there has been a renaissance of research into the Late Medieval period in the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland – focussed especially on the Church – a comprehensive modern overview of the MacDonald lordship in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has remained a conspicuous absentee on the publications horizon.

The essays in this volume, amongst which are two substantially revised and developed papers from that original 1994 conference, are not claimed to constitute such a comprehensive overview; they focus on key themes that illustrate the culture(s) and identity/ identities of the territories encompassed by the MacDonald Lordship at its peak, from portable personal artefacts to ships, buildings and the visual signifiers of heraldry; episodes critical in the development, downfall and disintegration of the MacDonalds' imperium; and institutions that gave form and substance to MacDonald power. None are 'traditional', indeed some might be regarded as iconoclastic in the challenges that they present to conventional understanding of issues such as the MacDonalds' relations with the Bruce family in Scotland and the Lancastrian kings in England, or the feudal/military lens through which castle-building and the projection of lordship in the West Highlands and Islands have long been viewed. By breaking through the constraining framework of prejudices and preconceptions that are the legacy of nineteenth-century historiography, these essays offer a new set of perspectives on the complex of land, sea, people, material expressions and mental imaginings that together constituted the political embodiment of the medieval Scottish Gaidhealtachd.

But what was that embodiment of the medieval Scottish Gaidhealtachd? There is perhaps a tendency to view it as territorially monolithic, a single entity that spanned the whole of the Hebrides and much of the West Highland mainland, united under a sole ruler and sharing common linguistic and material cultural norms. A key aim in assembling this collection of essays has been to take a fresh look at that vision of unitary identity free from the expressions of 'manifest destiny' that coloured much nineteenth-century writing that revolved around Clan Donald and the claims voiced on its behalf by generations of Gaelic sennachaidhs and clan historians to a role as rightful leaders of the Gael. These claims 'established' the MacDonalds' descent extending back to the apical figure of Somerled/Somairle, and then founded on a

concocted royal pedigree equal to that of the kings of Scots from him to the ninth-century Irish warrior Gofraidh, son of Fearghus, who was described anachronistically in the seventeenth-century *Annals of the Four Masters* as ‘chief of the Innsi Gall’ at the time of his death.¹ In re-evaluating that traditional vision, many of the contributors have confronted a series of the pillars upon which several of the established perceptions of the MacDonalds’ place within the wider frame of Scottish history have been constructed. Questioning the teleological determinism and Whiggish perspectives of much nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century historiography, they have raised challenging questions over the traditional projection of the Lordship as a ‘state-within-a-state’ competing with Lowland Scotland’s anglophone political community for primacy, threatening both the territorial integrity and independent existence of the kingdom, and whose rulers’ prestige and power rivalled the authority of the kings of Scots. Beyond this political historical recontextualisation, however, these studies have also explored aspects of the social and cultural behaviour of the MacDonalds, questioning the traditional presentation of the relationship with the east and south of the mainland in terms of socio-cultural polar opposites and revealing instead the interconnectedness and hybridity of what has long been depicted as distinct blocs. Sharp cleavages there certainly were between the predominantly Gaelic- and predominantly English-speaking districts, but there were equally sharp distinctions within those blocs and areas where cultural interfaces were blurred.

Regardless of the antiquity-forging (in every sense of that term) intentions of generations of Clan Donald poets, genealogists and the more recent scholars who have accepted their claims, there remains one inescapable fact: for nearly two centuries, the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland were dominated by one family, the MacDonalds of Islay. Descended from the great twelfth-century warlord Somerled/Somairle, they had long contended with their kinsmen the MacDougalls and the MacRuairis for the headship of their extended kin-network and the lordship of the Hebrides and Argyll which that brought. Long overshadowed by both of those rival families, it was in the turmoil of the Wars of Independence that the MacDonalds found the opportunity to achieve superiority and in the political upheavals of fourteenth-century Scotland were given the circumstances to consolidate their position of dominance and create an enduring territorial lordship in the West. Whilst they could trace their ancestry to the mid-1100s, in most of the surviving early post-medieval MacDonald family histories celebrating and emphasising that lineage at least as much stress was placed on the significance of John MacDonald, the head of the kin for most of the fourteenth century, who moved his family from the margins into the political mainstream of the kingdom. For more modern writers John held an added significance; it was in his Latin charters that the title *dominus Insularum* (Lord of the Isles) appears first to have been deployed, resulting in his labelling as 1st Lord of the Isles. Although the totemic status of this Latin title is now played down in most scholarly analysis, which points instead to its origin simply in the translation of the Gaelic style *rí Innse Gall* (King of the Islands of the Strangers) used of Hebridean rulers from the eleventh century,² it has remained a convenient device for justifying the arbitrary dividing-line between the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Kingdom of the Isles and a fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Lordship. Artificial though the division

¹ <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T100005A/> annal M851 16. For discussion of this fictive heritage see A Woolf, ‘The origins and ancestry of Somerled: Gofraid mac Fergus and “the Annals of the Four Masters”’, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 15 (2005), 199-213.

² *ALI*, xix-xx.

is, it has been adopted in this volume as the chronological frame within which the focus of the contributing scholars has fallen.

The Lordship of the Isles: to academic and non-academic audiences alike the name is laden equally with historical and romantic associations that are the products of the complex and often contradictory constructions of Scottish identity-making that appeared in literary and antiquarian circles in the early nineteenth century. As a modern historiographical tradition evolved, that mix of romance and history has elicited often extreme responses amongst historians, most writing with a Lowland Scottish perspective that was distinctly antipathetic to Highland and Hebridean culture yet at the same time was curiously attracted to the ‘otherness’ to their own cultural experience that it represented. For some the Lordship was a warning from history, an exemplar of everything that was wrong with alternatives to mainstream anglophone Scottish/British culture, and to be held up as a mirror to the positive achievements of that with which it collided and against which it ultimately failed. Alternative evocations of the shattering ruination of a once-united and stable Highlands and Islands at the close of the fifteenth century in the aftermath of the Lowland government’s dismemberment of the Lordship may be a distortion of historical realities, but proponents of this vision were surely right to emphasise the ‘importance and [...] potentialities’ of simply the idea of ‘the last principality of Gaelic Alba’. For them the appeal of the Lordship was as much in its ‘might have beens’ as in the very real achievements in the arts, music and literature that were fostered by its existence.³ But their celebration of the Lordship’s unique contribution to the diversity and richness of medieval Scotland highlighted just that sense of difference and detachment that their opponents viewed as dangerous and threatening to the project that was the making of the medieval Scottish kingdom. The result has been an historiography of immense complexity and often extreme polarity, where the conflicts of five centuries past have been refought with venom and vitriol surpassing the bitterness of the original struggles, and where even attempted objectivity could be construed as a carefully contrived slight. This present study seeks to navigate a course through these paper conflicts to explore the diverse historiographical strands and examine their collective contributions to the formation of current academic views on the place of the Lordship of the Isles within the context of medieval Scotland.

This overview of the modern historiography of the Lordship of the Isles takes as its starting-point Patrick Fraser Tytler’s *History of Scotland*, published in stages from 1828 to 1843.⁴ Tytler’s method, which was grounded in his training as a lawyer, saw the exposure of his historical sources to rigorous and sceptical analysis, and saw the completion of an intellectual shift that had begun in the mid eighteenth century from an historiographical tradition where interpretation was based on modern assumptions coloured by the authors’ personal prejudices to one where interpretation was instead founded on the evidence of contemporary witnesses. Although still deeply coloured by Tytler’s own political Toryism, his exploration of the triumph of Scotland’s laws and legal institutions despite the descent into social violence, foreign and civil warfare accompanied by a collapse in the authority of central government, became established as the foundation upon which most later-nineteenth-century Scottish academic writing on history was raised.⁵ Tytler fixed a series of key themes as the central and defining characteristics within Scotland’s historical experience into his narrative, cementing them into place as veritable articles of faith in the historical canon that was developed

³ I F Grant, *Lordship of the Isles: Wanderings in the Lost Lordship* (Edinburgh, 1935) 7.

⁴ P F Tytler, *History of Scotland*, 9 volumes (Edinburgh, 1828-43).

⁵ M Ash, *The Strange Death of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1980), 22-6.

from his work. Many of these themes arose from post-Union Scottish legal-philosophical perspectives on the constitution, most notably his strongly Tory views on what constituted good and strong government, on the cultural rectitude of Lowland values, and on the conflicts between private ambition and public responsibility – often expressed in terms of unjust means of achieving just ends – all given sharper relief by the unconscious reflex of his own cultural prejudices. Further nuance was added by his conviction that there had existed an impulse in pre-Union Scotland towards the kinds of liberty represented by the modern British constitution, but that that impulse had been thwarted by the disorder that had flowed from English attempts to conquer Scotland and Scottish resistance to those attempts.

Several of these strands combined in Tytler's treatment of the place of the Lordship within the medieval kingdom. In his reading of the late medieval chronicle discussion of a distinction between Highland and Lowland cultures, such as that which had been brought to recent scholarly attention through Walter Goodall's 1769 edition of the narrative attributed to John of Fordun,⁶ and from parliamentary records of legislation directed against certain manifestations of Highlanders' social behaviour, he saw the historical roots of the Highland-Lowland antagonism that had been brought to its bloody climax almost within living memory at the battle of Culloden and in its aftermath. From this perception of ancient enmity between opposed cultures he constructed the first detailed 'modern' treatment of the notion of a racial division in medieval Scotland between Gaels and Saxons/Teutons or Highlanders and Lowlanders.⁷ Despite his extended analysis of what he perceived to be the racial or cultural composition of the kingdom there was little in his historical narrative that threw any light on the emergence of the political institutions of the Highlands and Islands, and the Lordship rather falteringly emerged as a topic in his discussion of David II's reign.⁸ From the outset, his discussion was constructed to support his gradualist view of the development of liberty under the British constitution, a regime which afforded the greatest degree of personal freedom to its citizens and under which the liberty of the state was a direct reflection of the morals of its people. The Lordship provided him with a perfect model to explore that linkage between degrees of liberty and good government and the moral qualities of the people: it is clear from Tytler's language that he regarded the Gaelic constituent of the medieval realm as inferior in that regard to the Lowland one, and that it thus posed a dangerous threat to the vision of a stable, united realm that was being advanced by the progressive, Lowlands-based monarchy.

Volume three of Tytler's work saw the political and cultural threat that the Lordship posed to Lowland Scotland and royal government explored in detail, commencing with discussion of the events surrounding the battle of Harlaw in 1411.⁹ Setting the tone that coloured most subsequent analyses of early Stewart Scotland until the 1990s, Tytler depicted Harlaw as an outcome of the chronic failure of royal government which he saw as characterising the period 1371 to 1424. In this he followed the presentation of that period as illustrated by 'Fordun' and his fifteenth-century continuator, Walter Bower, as a time of disorder, where the strong preyed on the weak and where violence was deployed casually as a political instrument. A straightforward reading of both the contemporary parliamentary record and the

⁶ *Joannis de Fordun Scotichronicon cum Supplementis et Continuatione Walteri Boweri*, ed W Goodall (Edinburgh, 1769).

⁷ Tytler, *History of Scotland*, ii (Edinburgh, 1829), Section II.

⁸ *Ibid*, 159, 169, 180, 182, 184, 189.

⁹ Tytler, *History of Scotland*, iii, 170-178, 249-58, 276-9.

narrative chronicle accounts appeared to support his perception; descriptions of violent disorder, failures to exercise justice, moral decadence and corruption, and of the debilitating internecine feuding and political machinations of the kingdom's social leadership abound.¹⁰ Tytler saw all of these elements coming together in a dispute over possession of the earldom of Ross which triggered the military collision at Harlaw. In that dispute, Donald of the Isles resorted to military aggression to secure possession and, in Tytler's eyes, underscore his superiority of right and power through carrying destruction into the heartland of the Scottish political establishment. It was, however, not just a policy of mindless violence, for Tytler used newly accessible documentary records to discuss Donald's diplomatic dealings with the English crown, and the threat which an alliance between him and Henry IV of England posed for the Scots.¹¹ Here, then, his views on both the disruptive impact of English efforts to impose their overlordship on Scotland and on the moral weakness of the Gael were combined to powerful effect.

Whilst Tytler's analysis succeeded in maintaining a balanced view of the justice of Donald's claims but the injustice of his actions, there emerged in it a clearly-stated belief in an 'old and deep-rooted hostility between the Celtic and Saxon race.'¹² The size, ferocity and exoticism of Donald's army featured prominently in his discussion set in contrast to the cultural normality and numerical inferiority of the Lowlanders who mustered to march against him. A subtle manifestation of these themes had been present since the sixteenth century in Lowland historiography but from Tytler onwards description of the contrasts shifted from supposed cultural polar opposites to one which presented that opposition in terms of mutually visceral hatred arising from race or ethnicity. A sense of cultural 'otherness' and of the threat posed by the Highlanders to settled Lowland society continued through much of the rest of Tytler's discussion,¹³ but the place of the Lordship within his grand narrative of Scottish historical, political and constitutional development remains marginal until the actions of its rulers impinged upon the political life of the kingdom more generally.

It is in respect of John 4th Lord that Tytler's focus fixed on the Lordship, commencing with John's involvement with the Earls of Douglas in the period 1452-5, but becoming most expansive in the context of the treaty negotiated in 1462 by John and his kinsman, Donald Balloch, with Edward IV of England, and its aftermath in 1475-6.¹⁴ Throughout, the chief protagonist in these events is John, that 'fierce and insurgent noble,' who is presented as the principal disturber of Highland Scotland and a notoriously recalcitrant rebel. In his account of the end of John's rule in 1493, Tytler constructed the narrative that became generally accepted through subsequent historical analyses for the next century: the young James IV recognising that the tyrannical regime of the Highland chiefs formed the greatest obstacle to the introduction of good government to the region determined to impose royal authority over them and curb their powers.¹⁵ In what followed, John became the architect of his own downfall, having 'the folly to defy the royal vengeance' and 'this formidable rebel' was rewarded with the consequent loss of his lands and possessions. It is, in essence, a moral tale that Tytler presents, of ambition, arrogance and ingratitude rewarded by justly-deserved total and irrecoverable loss of titles, lands and, more

¹⁰ See, for example,

¹¹ Tytler, *History of Scotland*, iii, 171.

¹² *Ibid*, 174.

¹³ See, for example, his discussion in volume iv (Edinburgh, 1831), 26-7, 125-8, 367-70.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 193-4, 245-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 367-70.

tragically, family, but it is coloured throughout by the implication that John's – and his predecessors' – actions were characteristic of the culture from which they sprang. For the good of the whole realm on its progress towards constitutional perfection as a partner in the modern British state, but particularly for the poor unfortunates who languished under MacDonald misrule, the Lordship had to go.

Tytler brought down the curtain on the Lordship of the Isles with the forfeiture of 1493, offering no discussion of the consequences of the king's actions and how actual government was exercised in the absence of the central figure of the Lord. Those were themes dealt with in depth for the first time by Donald Gregory, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, whose 1836 *History of the Western Highlands* tackled the turbulent era of political reconstruction in the region from 1493 to 1625.¹⁶ To provide context for the post-1493 position, Gregory constructed an historical narrative for the period 80-1493, the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sections of which were based heavily on Tytler but with significant input of ideas from Gregory's friends, colleagues and fellow-Antiquarians Cosmo Innes and William F Skene. Gregory, as a member also of the Iona Club and Ossianic Society of Glasgow, and as his close friendship with William Skene would suggest, was altogether more Celtophilic than Tytler. As a consequence, his work lacks much of the cultural prejudice that pervaded Tytler's *History* and provides a more nuanced view of the place of the medieval Gaidhealtachd within Scotland. One particularly significant departure from Tytler's standpoint was Gregory's emphasis on the place of the MacDonalds vis à vis Scottish magnate politics and the integration of West Highland lords into the Scottish political community. His discussion of the rise of the MacDonald Lordship from the time of Angus Óg into the career of his son, John 1st Lord, revolves around the close personal relationship of the former with King Robert I and the collapse of that relationship through the latter's (non-)relationship with David II and frequent collisions with magnate rivals.¹⁷ There is, too, an emphasis on John's rebelliousness as being a response to Scottish royal policies rather than it being simply an expression of his ambitions for independence; his intrigues with England, however, were in Gregory's eyes still unequivocally treasonable.¹⁸ Government failures to deal justly with the grievances of John's son and grandson, the weakness and partisanship of the rule of the Albany Stewarts, and their failure to manage the often conflicting demands of the MacDonalds and their kinsmen added to the estrangement of the Lords of the Isles from the Scottish political community.

For Gregory, the proof of this view of Highland disturbance arising from Lowland government mismanagement was to be seen in Alexander 3rd Lord's later good relationship with James I, his loyalty arising from due appreciation of 'the lenity shown to him by a prince celebrated for the unbending rigour of his government.'¹⁹ The departure from this more positive view of MacDonald/Stewart relations comes with John, 4th Lord, but even here his political machinations were interpreted by Gregory in the wider context of crown-magnate relations in mid-fifteenth-century Scotland, with John being enmeshed with and obliged to his political associates the Douglasses. In that regard, Gregory had no dispute with Tytler's view that John was the architect of his own downfall in 1475/6, but he is altogether more ambivalent with respect to post-1476 events. Rather than continuing to be the schemer and active

¹⁶ D Gregory, *The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1836).

¹⁷ Gregory, *Western Highlands*, 2nd edition, 25-7. For a reappraisal of the MacDonald/Bruce relationship, see Penman, this volume.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 28, 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 39.

disturber of the peace that Tytler presented him as, Gregory saw John as a passive bystander in events driven by more aggressive members of his family.²⁰ Indeed, in his final judgement of John in the context of the 1493 forfeiture, Gregory for the first time floated the suggestion that perhaps his ‘chief crime’ was his ‘inability to keep the wild tribes of the West Highlands and Islands in proper subjection’ rather than his rebelliousness.²¹ Disregarding the dubiousness of any claim that all that was needed to keep the region in check was firm government, this otherwise was a perceptive observation but it was over a century before it won more widespread acceptance as a factor behind James IV’s suppression of the Lordship.

The significance of Gregory’s *History* lay in its use of primary historical records to provide its supporting evidence rather than resorting to the mainly late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century clan histories upon which most earlier discussions had been based. In this approach he followed Tytler and, as a consequence, his work has had enduring significance as the first modern historical analysis of the MacDonalds. It meant, too, that his work was heavily mined by the writers of a host of later nineteenth-century clan histories, typified by Alexander Mackenzie’s 1881 *History of the MacDonalds and Lords of the Isles*.²² Narrative in format and hugely derivative of other historians’ work, Mackenzie’s greatest contribution to the evolving historiography was his observations on the difficulty that any MacDonald seemed to have in writing an unbiased history of the family and its chieftains.²³ Although this comment was pointed principally at the seventeenth-century clan historians who had written very much from the perspective of their own segment of the MacDonalds’ notions of where the headship of the by then fragmented kin rightfully lay and who clearly manipulated the historical evidence to suit their case, Mackenzie also very much had the contemporary MacDonald historians firmly in his sights. Although roundly criticised by those same historians, there is value in Mackenzie’s efforts to draw together the various strands which comprised MacDonald historiography by the last quarter of the nineteenth century and reconcile it with the mainstream Lowland historiography that had burgeoned since Tytler’s day. The result, however, is to modern eyes a bizarre series of quoted extracts from the principal authorities strung together with a commentary by Mackenzie that in places is clearly struggling to construct a coherent narrative from seemingly contradictory sources. It was, nevertheless, a generally positive view of the Lordship, albeit one that saw its proper historical context as being the wider history of the medieval kingdom rather than as an independent entity.

Amongst the most formidable of Mackenzie’s critics were the Reverends Angus and Archibald MacDonald, whose three-volume study *The Clan Donald* was published between 1896 and 1904.²⁴ Their work remains the most comprehensive history of the clan and its various branches. Volume one was devoted to the rise of the family from the time of Somerled and traces its history through the senior line down to the death of Donald Dubh in 1545, bracketed by an introductory overview chapter outlining the pre-twelfth-century history of the Isles and two concluding chapters outlining the social history of the insular Gaidhealtachd and the ecclesiastical history of the area. Like Gregory, it was founded on exhaustive documentary

²⁰ Ibid, 51-2, 53, 55.

²¹ Ibid, 57.

²² A Mackenzie, *History of the MacDonalds and Lords of the Isles* (Inverness, 1881).

²³ Ibid, Preface.

²⁴ A MacDonald and A MacDonald, *The Clan Donald*, 3 volumes (Inverness, 1896-1904). See their comments on Mackenzie in vol 1, Preface, viii.

analysis, volumes two and three drawing together much previously unpublished material from the archives of the various cadet lines of the clan. But herein lies one of its chief weaknesses, very much as Mackenzie had earlier warned; it is a partisan study, produced by and for MacDonalDs and with a decidedly positive view of the contribution of the MacDonalD Lords of the Isles to Scotland's history. In the MacDonalDs' analysis, for example, the Highlands under the rule of Alexander 3rd Lord of the Isles and his son, John 4th Lord, was a haven of tranquillity in comparison to the faction-ridden south of the kingdom,²⁵ an assessment which neatly sidesteps the strife-torn early years of Alexander's lordship and sits ill at ease with the extensive accounts of plundering raids which they provide at length in their discussion. This stance was also a reaction against the traditionally unsympathetic portrayal of the Highlands in mainly Lowland-focussed histories, their interpretation – as discussed below – becoming if anything yet more negative as the nineteenth century progressed. The result was a conscious turning of what Tytler had presented as Gaelic cultural vices into virtues, exemplified in the apology offered for Donald Balloch's role in the 1462 treaty negotiations with Edward IV of England, where it was his 'Celtic spirit, keen, restless, and eager,' that led him to throw his energies into the scheme.²⁶ Although the MacDonalDs' highly positive interpretation of events might have won favour with an increasingly Celtophilic element in Scottish academic and antiquarian circles – symbolised in the establishment of a Chair of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh in 1882 – it nevertheless stood in stark variance to the deeply-entrenched traditional Scottish historical canon. While their analysis of the documentary evidence and the transcriptions that they provided would win their work respect amongst academic historians, their stridently pro-MacDonalD and Highland stance failed to secure broader recognition in the Scottish historical mainstream.

Despite Gregory and the MacDonalDs' efforts, throughout the nineteenth century mainstream historical writing continued to define the relationship between the Lords of the Isles and the Scottish crown in terms of Tytler's struggle to the death between incompatibly opposed racial groups within a single nation. An extreme view of such cultural and racial collision was expressed in John Hill Burton's account of the MacDonalD/Stewart confrontation at Harlaw, which he saw as the 'final struggle for supremacy between the Highlands and the Lowlands.'²⁷ He viewed these regions as having diverged irretrievably in terms of core values by the fourteenth century, with Lowland Scottish culture achieving unquestionable superiority at all levels over that of the Highlands. He dismissed any suggestion that Harlaw should be regarded as an episode in a civil conflict between parties who under other circumstances would have lived and worked in harmony; such partnership was not 'within their range of rational expectations.'²⁸ He claimed further that in Lowland Scotland Harlaw:

was felt as a more memorable deliverance even than that of Bannockburn. What it was to be subject to England the country knew and disliked; to be subdued by their savage enemies of the mountains opened to them sources of terror of unknown character and extent.²⁹

His presentation of Highland-Lowland relations is charged with the language of ancient and implacable animosity, mutual hatred and irresolvable conflict based on

²⁵ Ibid, 201-202, 244. See also comments on 208-9.

²⁶ Ibid, 236.

²⁷ J Hill Burton, *The History of Scotland from Agricola's Invasion to the Revolution of 1688*, new edition, vol 2 (Edinburgh, 1901), 389-90.

²⁸ Ibid, 393.

²⁹ Ibid, *History of Scotland*, vol 2, 394.

racially-determined cultural opposites: industrious and diligent Lowland agriculturalists and burghers against idle, indolent and predatory Highlanders. This view ran counter to late Victorian Celtophilism in Scotland, especially following the Queen's express admiration of Highland culture since the late 1840s. It does, however, reflect the ambivalence displayed towards Gaelic culture more generally in late nineteenth-century Britain, where one segment of society's public expressions of conscience over the treatment of Highlanders since 1746 and more especially in respect of the Highland Clearances were matched by another's certainty in the moral and cultural degeneracy of the Gaels.

Hill Burton's stridently anti-Highland tone is at one historiographical extreme and few academic historians shared similar views. Racial difference, however, remained prominent in historical discussion of Lowland/Highland conflict. In his 1899 *History of Scotland*, Peter Hume Brown, the first Professor of Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh, shared Hill Burton's racial/cultural views. Again with reference to Harlaw's significance, he claimed that it '...ranks with the battle of Carham (1018) in its determining influence on the development of the Scottish nation [...] never since that day has Teutonic Scotland been in real danger from the Celtic race to whom it owed its being.'³⁰ Hume Brown's statement was made in the context of his discussion of the 'making of Scotland' and his view of the transformation of the nation from one where Scottish culture and society was predominantly Celtic in character to one where Lowland, English-speaking culture was regarded as characteristically Scottish. In his assessment, it was the ultimate triumph of Lowland over Highland culture that determined the whole future development of Scotland as a progressive, industrious nation, setting it on the path to eventual partnership with England.

Within the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lowland Scottish historical tradition the affairs of the Lordship were problematical in that they ran contrary to the grand narratives of state-building and identity-shaping which were central to that tradition. The habit of writers such as Hill Burton and Hume Brown of referring to the Lowland districts and their populations as Scotland/Scots and the Highlands and Islands as Celtic reinforced an idea of separation that positioned the northern and western parts of mainland Scotland and the Isles as at best marginal and at worst external to the medieval kingdom and its people. This trend reached its fullest expression in Andrew Lang's somewhat confused and often contradictory discussion of the relationship of the Lordship of the Isles with the rest of the kingdom. His account consisted of isolated vignettes thrown into a grand narrative that took the south-eastern Lowland experience as being representative of all of Scotland. Lang acknowledged his debt to Hume Brown in the preface to his work, and, while he disagreed with his 'overrated' description of Harlaw as 'a strife for Celtic or Lowland supremacy in the north,'³¹ his down-playing of the significance of the battle was his only deviation from Hume Brown's wider thesis of a cultural clash. Lang's general treatment of Highland-Lowland relations hinges on a deep-seated racial antipathy that he believed was already in evidence in the twelfth century. In his stridently Whiggish view of Scotland's long march towards unity, stability and prosperity, the 'Celts' were incorrigible troublemakers whose actions on occasion threatened the security and indeed the existence of the kingdom, and whose behaviour required troublesome digressions from his chronological narrative of the events that truly made Scotland.³²

³⁰ P Hume Brown, *History of Scotland*, i, (Cambridge, 1899), 167.

³¹ A Lang, *A History of Scotland*, 5th edition, vol 1 (Edinburgh, 1929), 292.

³² Lang, *History of Scotland*, vol 1, 372.

Lang's use of language compounds the negative tone of his account: the alignment of John MacDonald with Edward Balliol in the 1330s, for example, was described as a purchasing of support from the "'auld enemies of Scotland" the children of Somerled, the Celts of the West and the Isles.'³³ His labelling of the Clan Sorley leadership in this matter as inveterate foes of the Scots is a generalisation that rests uncomfortably with both his earlier account of the adherence of Clan Donald to the Bruce cause, and his subsequent comments on the relationship between the same John and the Steward.³⁴

The most extreme manifestation of Lang's conflict over how to interpret Highland-Lowland relations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries emerged in his account of the Harlaw campaign. In a convoluted passage where he claimed on the one hand that 'the Celts, as a whole, were nothing less than sturdy maintainers of Scottish independence' but on the other 'recognised no common part in Lowland patriotism,' Lang ended by decrying the events of 1411 as proof 'that Scotland could be stabbed [...] from behind, by the Celtic pensioner of England.'³⁵ Indeed, he further speculated that Donald 2nd Lord's negotiations with Henry IV were intended to secure English military assistance for his adventure. In the end, despite an oddly Celtophilic strand in his work,³⁶ Lang identified with the Lowland 'Scots' and their supposed perception of the Highland 'Celts' as an enemy within. Like Hume Brown and Hill Burton before him, Lang presented this episode as a climactic event in a long-evolving conflict between racial or cultural groups who shared little common identity beyond their subjection to the same king. Indeed, the cultural gulf between the Highlanders and Lowlanders was deemed sufficient explanation for the tendency of the former to ally with the English against the latter, just as the Scots allied with the French. It was not, Lang explains, a matter of patriotism or any lack thereof; for the Celt, his own interests were paramount.³⁷ As with most accounts of the breakdown in Stewart-MacDonald relations, the final tipping-point in the breach came with the dispute over Ross. Regardless of the rights and wrongs in this issue, Lang laid stress on Donald's status as a pensioner of the English crown at this time and, with remarkable overstatement, claimed that to admit his right to Ross would have placed practically the whole of the North of Scotland in the hands of this unpredictable Celt. Not only was racial or cultural difference being raised as a critical dimension of the breach – although Lang is more tempered than most of his predecessors in his presentation of events – but the relationship of the greatest Celtic magnate with the king of England was being trailed by him as constituting a grave danger to the integrity or survival of the Scottish realm.³⁸

After the high drama of 1411, the Lordship vanished from Lang's nation-building narrative to re-emerge fleetingly in his discussion of the personal rule of James I. There, after a passing reference to the alignment of Alexander 3rd Lord's interests with those of the king in the destruction of the Albany Stewarts, the central themes are of Highland disorder juxtaposed with royal duplicity in the further undermining of Crown-MacDonald relations.³⁹ Alexander's son, John, received a similar cameo

³³ Ibid, 256.

³⁴ See, for example, *ibid*, 217-9, 264, 265-6. His misnaming of some of the principal members of the Mac Somhairle lineage adds further to the confusion.

³⁵ Ibid, 290-292.

³⁶ For discussion of this tension in Lang's writing, see R D Oram, *David I: the King Who Made Scotland* (Stroud, 2004), 219-220.

³⁷ Ibid, 291.

³⁸ Ibid, 291-2.

³⁹ Ibid, 304-6.

appearance in the narrative of internecine magnate feuding in the minority of James II, introduced as protector of James Livingstone after his fall from grace and, without explanation, in possession of the royal castle at Urquhart on Loch Ness-side.⁴⁰ The seventeen-year-old John's seizure of Urquhart and Ruthven in Badenoch, and burning of Inverness – dismissed as an 'escapade' – and his cousin Donald Balloch's devastating raids on the Clyde coast are again simply presented as illustrations of the threat posed by Clan Donald to the kingdom's security and stability, but little rationale is offered for those events. The theme of treachery on the part of the Clan Donald leadership, however, re-emerges explicitly in Lang's discussion of Anglo-Scottish relations during the minority of James III. Then, in a return to the imagery employed in respect of the Harlaw conflict, John MacDonald's league with Edward IV of England was labelled as an opportunity to 'stab Scotland in the back with a Celtic dirk.'⁴¹

Throughout Lang's forays into Highland and Hebridean affairs it was John MacDonald who was the guiding hand behind Clan Donald's political and diplomatic manoeuvres; he was the 'Celtic wolf' who lorded it over the 'Lowland sheep'.⁴² This view of John 4th Lord as the driving-force in Clan Donald policy or as the dominant power even within the territories over which he was nominally lord is not one that accords well with more recent assessments,⁴³ nor does it sit comfortably with Lang's own wider discussion of Highland affairs. In his commentary on the downfall of the lordship from 1475 onwards he owed much to Gregory; while John remained central to the narrative he was presented as a pathetic figure, genuinely penitent and contrite, but whose efforts to reach a lasting settlement with the king were frustrated by his inability to control either his son or his other MacDonald kinsmen.⁴⁴ The final forfeiture of John and suppression of the lordship in 1493 merited a mere three sentences, while the aftermath was explained in simple terms of royal skill in James IV's adroit manipulation of rivalries within both Clan Donald and between the clans who sought to benefit from the elimination of their former overlord.⁴⁵ There were serious challenges ahead, but Lang's view was that James IV had settled the Highland problem 'as far as it ever was settled till after Culloden.'⁴⁶ Henceforward, the region's history could be treated simply as a side-event in the Scottish grand narrative.

While Hume Brown, Lang and their followers carried the Victorian historiographical tradition of a clash of two culturally-opposed races into the twentieth century, a divergent thesis had already emerged with the 1911 publication by R S Rait of the first modern academic articulation of an alternative interpretation.⁴⁷ Without naming Hill Burton, Rait explicitly rejected his view of the collision between MacDonald Lords and Stewart kings as being fundamentally racial and cultural in origin and pointed to the neutral accounts of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources. His down-playing of the race or culture dimension and emphasis instead on the dynastic politics that drove MacDonald-Stewart relations was endorsed enthusiastically in the 1930s by W C Mackenzie, who famously presented the most prominent example of those dynastic politics – Harlaw - as '...really a family

⁴⁰ Ibid, 327, 330.

⁴¹ Ibid, 336.

⁴² Ibid, 342.

⁴³ See especially MacDougall, 'Achilles' Heel?'

⁴⁴ Lang, *History of Scotland*, 342-3.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 366, 370-2.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 370.

⁴⁷ R S Rait, *Scotland* (London, 1911), 111-112.

squabble, all the parties being related by blood or marriage.⁴⁸ That statement was later attacked as a trivialising of the significance of the battle,⁴⁹ but his critic missed a central point in Rait's and Mackenzie's discussions: the cultural hybridity of the leading combatants and the closeness of the political and familial links between the leadership on both sides.

Rait and his followers, however, failed to displace Hume Brown from his dominant position, principally through the pre-eminent place as the 'standard' work that Hume Brown's *History* held in Scottish schools and universities. That pre-eminence was only countered effectively for the first time in the early 1960s when William Croft Dickinson, a successor to Hume Brown in the Scottish History chair at Edinburgh, produced a new overview of the kingdom's evolution to 1603.⁵⁰ In a brief analysis all-too-often overlooked in more recent discussions, Croft Dickinson discounted explanations that followed a racial or cultural line and like Mackenzie stressed instead the cultural hybridity of the senior members of both the Stewarts and the MacDonalDs.⁵¹ This approach was exemplified by his discussion of Donald 2nd Lord's Stewart blood and status as a grandson of King Robert II, while in the case of Alexander Stewart, earl of Mar, he was one of the first modern scholars to attach significance to the earl's Gaelic credentials and former status as a leader of caterans. Although individual components of Croft Dickinson's thesis have been challenged more recently, it is essentially his vision of Highland/Lowland oppositions as a protracted struggle for economic resources and political dominance amongst the Scottish ruling elite that still frames most modern discussion.

By the 1960s, the historiographical trend towards a narrative predicated upon a vision that equated 'national' history with the history of the dominant socio-economic and political zones of the kingdom had become established as the mainstream tradition. The 'making of the kingdom' theme that had run through Scottish historical writing since the early nineteenth century increasingly adopted a perspective where the Scottish crown and its most responsive agents were presented as positive forces struggling to build a stable state in the face of rebellious provinces and over-ambitious magnates with pretensions to independence. The extension of Scottish royal authority across mainland Scotland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was discussed in terms of a regaining of rights that had been lost in the face of the Scandinavian irruption of the ninth to eleventh centuries or the elimination of dynastic rivals who had usurped the rightful powers of the men calling themselves kings of Scots. That restoration of royal authority was viewed as having reached its natural and logical limits under Alexander III, in whose reign the last portions of the supposed ancestral homeland of his dynasty in Argyll and the Isles was reintegrated into the kingdom. Despite recognition of how recent the assertion of Scottish lordship over the western Highlands and Hebrides was and how shallowly-rooted any notion of a distinctly Scottish identity for themselves was on the part of the Islesmen, the subsequent history of the region was being constructed in the new narrative histories from a firmly Lowland and monarchocentric perspective. The history of the Lordship of the Isles especially was viewed from within the bubble of this national historiography as part of that sub-set labelled as later medieval crown-magnate relations.

⁴⁸ W C Mackenzie, *The Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1937), 94.

⁴⁹ R Nicholson, *Scotland: the Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974), 236.

⁵⁰ W Croft Dickinson, *A New History of Scotland*, vol 1, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603* (Edinburgh, 1961).

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 202.

One of the most influential manifestations of this trend appeared in J D Mackie's single-volume *A History of Scotland*, first published in 1964 and re-published in successive editions down to the late 1990s. Allowance must be made for the constraints of the single-volume overview format, but in the construction of its strongly Whiggish narrative Mackie underplayed the centripetal impulses that emanated from the cultural diversity of the hybrid and synthetic state constructed by the descendents of Malcolm III and overplayed the unifying role of Scottish kingship. Thus, the relationship of the four MacDonald Lords of the Isles with the Stewarts was observed through the lens of crown-magnate politics and presented as a manifestation of the conflict between over-mighty, self-serving nobles and a far-sighted, high-minded monarchy that he viewed as the dominant theme in the political history of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁵² The Lord of the Isles may have 'exercised authority almost independent of that of the King,'⁵³ but there was no question that he was anything other than a Scottish nobleman operating within the political sphere of the kingdom. For Mackie, the early fifteenth-century struggle for Ross was a straightforward dispute over title and inheritance between rival members of a single social group, 'misrepresented as a struggle between Highland and Lowland,'⁵⁴ while James I's actions against both the MacDonalds and their Albany Stewart rivals was one dimension of his aggressive reassertion of crown authority over the magnates. Thus, too, the forfeiture of Ross in 1475/6 became simply part of James III's reimposition of royal power in the aftermath of the disorder of his minority,⁵⁵ while the forfeiture of 1493 was a solution to the almost endemic disturbance of the north-west Highlands and Islands that stemmed from John MacDonald's inability to provide good lordship.⁵⁶ James IV's forceful action was the epitome of good lordship and strong government, while the behaviour of John, his son Angus Óg, and his nephew Alexander of Lochalsh, represented the antithesis of those virtues.

Mackie's view of the political context for the Lordship found similar expression in Rosalind Mitchison's 1970 one-volume history. Although she highlighted its cultural and social distinctiveness, her discussion placed the Lordship within the wider context of the Scottish noble community and compared the political behaviour of the Lords to other Scottish – and indeed French – magnates.⁵⁷ Interestingly, she focussed on the comparisons to be made with the Dukes of Brittany, especially the quasi-regal trappings with which the positions of Duke and Lord were imbued and their semi-detached relationship with the kingdoms to which they were at least nominally subject. But she also drew important distinctions: Breton dukes had a complex bureaucracy to support their government; the Lords of the Isles depended on personal influence and force to provide the 'governing machinery' of their principality. This latter point is of crucial importance in her discussion of the John 4th Lord, who was dismissed in terms of which Donald Gregory would have approved. In her words, John 'was not a man to drive anything through consistently'; his personal weakness contributed significantly to the ultimate collapse of the power of the Lordship.⁵⁸ Wider exploration of the fall of the Lordship, however, again emphasised the place of

⁵² J D Mackie, *A History of Scotland* (London, 1964), chapter 5 'The Crown and the Barons 1371-1488'.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 89.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 97.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 100.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 114-5.

⁵⁷ R Mitchison, *A History of Scotland*, 2nd edition (London, 1982), 59, 64-5, 71-2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 75, 82.

the MacDonalds within the magnate community, their behaviour again being compared directly with their peer-group elsewhere in Scotland. Mitchison concluded her discussion of the forfeiture of the Lordship and its aftermath with observations presented wholly from a central government perspective: James IV had dealt with the Lordship just as he would have dealt with any troublesome magnate anywhere in the kingdom, but in so doing he failed to recognise the role that even a weak Lord of the Isles had played in binding together the fractious kindreds of the Gaelic West. For Mitchison, it was the demise of the Lordship at James's hands that created the disorder in which 'clan chiefs [began to come] forward and act as nearly independent rulers.'⁵⁹ Although somewhat grudging in tone, it is also a surprisingly upbeat assessment of the positive contribution of the Lordship in a historical analysis that is resolutely focussed on 'the making of the kingdom'.

These themes were explored in greater detail and with more subtlety by Ranald Nicholson in his 1974 contribution to the four-volume *Edinburgh History of Scotland*. His work attracted much criticism in the 1980s and 1990s for its monarchocentric perspective and its decidedly bleak vision of crown-magnate relations under the Stewart kings down to James IV, but more recently its analysis of the essentially negative role of the over-mighty subject in medieval Scottish political life has regained more widespread academic acceptance. His treatment of the Lordship of the Isles is more problematical, for there are clear tensions in his exploration of the cultural difference between the Gaelic Highlands and Islands and the anglophone Lowlands which points to a unity of identity and a separation of existence, and his discussion of the political activities of the Lords which occurs largely within a frame of Scottish crown-magnate relations. This tension was clear in Nicholson's exploration of the career of John 1st Lord, and the domain over which he ruled, which occurred in a series of sections dispersed across three chapters. When John was first discussed in detail it was in the context of his political opportunism, which Nicholson argues saw him commit to neither side in the Bruce-Balliol conflict of the 1330s. Although presented as operating within the frame of Scottish domestic politics, John was portrayed as manoeuvring adroitly as a semi-detached agent between the rival factions to maximise his parchment-based territorial acquisitions without being obliged to commit his resources militarily.⁶⁰ Although he reached a 'final concord' in 1343 which bound him to David II, his avoidance of the 1346 campaign is perhaps a better measure of his commitment to Bruce kingship. John's subsequent return to a policy of aggressive neutrality, where he capitalised on opportunities to enhance his own position without committing himself to the continuing Scottish civil war and Anglo-Scottish conflict, again reveals him as a free agent operating in the voids between the spheres of Scottish or English power.⁶¹ His marriage into the Stewarts which occurred in the midst of this period, however, was used by Nicholson in the first instance to illustrate John's revival of the Hebrides-based domain of his ancestor Somerled, but was developed also to stress his integration into a network of strategic alliances that united a group of lords – the Steward, the Lord of the Isles, the Earl of Ross, and the heads of the MacDougall and Campbell kindreds – in what he labelled as 'a sort of "Highland Party"'.⁶² John, in this analysis, was at once a semi-detached agent yet simultaneously integrated through a network of marital and political

⁵⁹ Ibid, 82-3.

⁶⁰ Nicholson, *Later Middle Ages*, 142-3.

⁶¹ Ibid, 154.

⁶² Ibid, 155-6.

alliances into one of the most powerful groupings within the mainland Scottish magnate community.

With John's great-grandson and namesake, John 4th Lord, Nicholson's discussion initially presented him as a senior Scottish nobleman – it was as the Earl of Ross that he was most often identified - and focused on his role in the crown-magnate conflicts of James II's reign.⁶³ Although a party to the bond which some contemporary sources saw as the catalyst for the king's murder of the 8th Earl of Douglas in 1452, John played no part in James's final confrontation with the Black Douglases in 1455 and participated, albeit through proctors, in the parliamentary process that ended the conflict. Nicholson saw the king as having bought Ross's neutrality, but both the bribes and the outcome were part of an unquestionably Scottish political process; neutral or otherwise, John was fully engaged within the Scottish political community. That engagement grew stronger as the reign progressed, and it was as a magnate of Scotland and loyal vassal of the crown that John participated in the 1460 campaign which ended in the king's death at Roxburgh.⁶⁴

Nicholson followed the traditional historiographical view in seeing a significant shift in the 4th Lord's political behaviour after the death of James II. From that point, Nicholson believed that he was drawn into direct dealings with the English crown that led ultimately to treasonable treaties with Edward IV.⁶⁵ John was, in his view, the active agent in this business. His behaviour Nicholson likened to that of Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, who responded violently to the constraints brought by growth of a unitary French state under the Valois kings from Charles VII onwards: the new and aggressively assertive Scottish monarchy that James I and James II had established was similarly unattractive to the MacDonalds. Nicholson, however, went beyond the analogy, suggesting that the cultural homogeneity of John's domain offered greater potential as state-forming material than the culturally and linguistically diverse lands of Duke Charles. But, although he agreed with previous assessments of John as 'steeped in duplicity' and being the 'Celtic dirk' with which Edward IV could stab Scotland in the back if he were so inclined,⁶⁶ he stepped back from any suggestion that the Earl of Ross was seeking to create an independent state. There is an inference, too, that John's actions in 1460-2 were more posturing than indicative of real intent: certainly, by 1464 he had made no move to activate the terms of his treaty with Edward IV and instead negotiated with the government of the underage James III and made restitution for his earlier behaviour.⁶⁷

Nicholson's implied leadership failings on John's part are voiced – but only slightly more clearly – in his account of the forfeiture of Ross in 1475/6. His deficiencies, however, were expressed in terms of uninspiring military leadership rather than any deeper defect of character, and the consequences of his submission were expressed firstly in terms of the opening up of northern and western Scotland to Lowland influences rather than its impact on his personal position.⁶⁸ Nicholson, however, went on to argue that the events of 1476 created fault lines within the MacDonald family, attributing to the surrender of Ross a decisive role in the breach between John and his

⁶³ Ibid, 374.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 396. He likewise loyally joined James III's muster of 1481 that ended in the coup at Lauder Bridge.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 401-3.

⁶⁶ The quotes are from A I Dunlop, *The Life and Times of James Kennedy, Bishop of St Andrews* (Edinburgh, 1950), 223 and Lang, *History of Scotland*, vol 1, 336.

⁶⁷ Nicholson, *Later Middle Ages*, 406-7.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 481.

heir which by 1481 had seen John reduced to the status of ‘a mere protégé of the crown.’⁶⁹ With John lacking means to express as effective lordship his titular headship of the kindred, rather than solving the crown’s problems in the Highlands the part-forfeiture of 1475/6 had instead opened a Pandora’s Box with younger and more hawkish members of the family seeking to assert their personal leadership. Nicholson’s discussion of their warlike adventures in the 1480s and early 1490s gives the impression of unfocussed, random violence and descent into general disorder in the Highlands and Islands, a situation that ‘offended the majesty of the new monarchy’ until eventually the exasperated king was forced into decisive action.⁷⁰ And it was, in Nicholson’s eyes, James IV who took the lead in the forfeiture of 1493 and who continued to direct operations there. In his final assessment it was a combination of Lowland cultural alienation from the Highlanders, weak or divided leadership, but above all the incompatibility of a semi-independent principality with the ambitions of a unitary monarchy and that monarchy’s violent intrusion of its authority into MacDonald territory that precipitated the fall of the Lordship.

Nicholson’s vision of later medieval Scotland and of the place of the Lordship within it has displayed remarkable historiographical stamina and its legacy is writ large in a broad raft of more recent works. Only three years after the first publication of his work, however, an alternative view of the Lordship which presented it in a far more positive light appeared in print. Like Nicholson’s account, this text has proven to have enduring influence over more recent scholars and is claimed by some to be the most authoritative analysis of the Lordship to date. Published as an appendix to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland’s *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, John Bannerman’s twelve-page essay was intended only to provide background to the monument-specific historical discussion offered in the main body of the volume.⁷¹ It offers neither a comprehensive chronological overview of the MacDonald Lordship nor any developed discussion of the internal dynamics which contributed to its demise but it does articulate clearly the lineal development of a West Highland and Hebridean power-bloc from the last days of Dalriada in the ninth century, through the Kingdom of the Isles and the realm constructed by Somerled in the twelfth century, to the later medieval Lordship of Somerled’s heirs. This political narrative is balanced by a second strand in which Bannerman focused on the cultural unity of the territories under MacDonald domination in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and emphasised how their all-embracing political leadership of the Scottish Gaidhealtachd provided the stimulus for an efflorescence of a distinctive Gaelic tradition in the arts. The failure of the Lordship, although not paralleled by an immediate failure of the Gaelic artistic tradition, signalled the end of what proved with hindsight to have been a Golden Age of cultural achievement.

Within his discussion, Bannerman highlighted several factors that he saw as having contributed to the establishment of MacDonald dominance and to the particular character of their Lordship. He identified in particular the fissiparous tendencies of the kin-based societies of Ireland and Scotland and the resulting alternation in the headship of the kindred between different branches through processes that were not

⁶⁹ Ibid, 482

⁷⁰ Ibid, 541-2.

⁷¹ J W M Bannerman, ‘The Lordship of the Isles – Historical Background’, in K A Steer and J W M Bannerman (eds), *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977), 201-213.

always peaceful.⁷² His belief in some kind of rotating headship of the kin, reflected in the title *Rí Innse Gall* (King of the Islands of the Foreigners) held by the acknowledged head, with a subordinate title of *Rí Airir Goidel* (King of Argyll/Coastland of the Gael) held by another kin-member, may not be favoured by more recent scholars, but his portrayal of competition between the descendents of Somerled for primacy is widely accepted.

Following the established historiographical tradition, Bannerman saw the main branches of Somerled's descendents as developing their powerbase in the interstices between the territories which recognised the overlordship of either the kings of Norway (in the Hebrides) or the kings of Scots (on the mainland). This position, he argued, permitted these families to operate as independent agents who paid lip-service to their nominal overlords. It is not explained how or why, but Bannerman suggested that it was this degree of political independence that perhaps led to them being 'more wholly committed to a purely Gaelic society and culture than the rest of Scotland.'⁷³ Nevertheless, as Scottish political influence increased in the thirteenth century and their overlordship of the Isles was confirmed by treaty in 1266, Bannerman conceded that the Gaelic character of their territories, particularly its cultural and social system, began 'to exhibit certain features which derived from a closer contact with East Scotland'. Somerled's own Scandinavian heritage was casually overlooked in this analysis and the vision of the Western Isles in particular as a zone of uniformly Gaelic culture from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries was accepted *de facto*. The historical conditions for the extension of Clan Donald lordship over all this zone of common Gaelic culture were projected back into the period from the ninth to thirteenth centuries; the MacDonald Lordship was, it seems, historically preordained.

Bannerman's inclination to translate cultural zones into political entities led him to make similar propositions for the extent of MacDonald lordship on the mainland. Basing his view on the genealogical sections within the document known prosaically as *MS 1467*, he proposed that the compiler of that document had intended the list of clan chiefs which he had constructed to be understood as comprising those who, in his opinion, acknowledged MacDonald overlordship.⁷⁴ In addition to the clans who occupied the Hebrides, Ross and Lochaber, the compiler of the manuscript named all of the leading mid and north Argyll clans – headed by the Campbells and the MacDougalls – and those occupying the territory which would later be labelled Breadalbane, principally the MacGregors, MacNabs and MacLarens, spread from Glenstrae in the west to Balquhidder in the east. The circumstances for this eastward expansion of MacDonald influence, Bannerman proposed, was the collapse of the traditional Gaelic kin-based power-structure within much of this region consequent on the forfeiture in the early fourteenth century of what he saw as the 'Celtic earldom of Atholl'.⁷⁵ Again, more recent scholarship calls into question the extent to which Breadalbane fell under the political leadership of Atholl before the fourteenth century and it is also questionable to what degree the Strathbogie earls of Atholl could be regarded as 'Celtic' by c.1300. Instead, Balquhidder, Glen Dochart, Glen Lyon, the lands bordering Loch Tay, and the district of Rannoch, appear to have been a series of discrete lordships over much of which Stewart control was being established from the 1360s.⁷⁶ Bannerman recognised that the eastward reach of the MacDonalds may have

⁷² Ibid, 202.

⁷³ Ibid, 202.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 205.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 206.

⁷⁶ S Boardman, *The Early Stewart Kings: Robert II and Robert III* (East Linton, 1996), 169-170.

been transitory or reflected more in terms of cultural leadership than political overlordship, but he did see that leadership as enduring into at least the mid-sixteenth century.⁷⁷ This view he based on the contents of the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, compiled by the brothers James and Duncan MacGregor, the first of whom was vicar of Fortingall in Glen Lyon and dean of Argyll, based at Lismore. Compiled in Breadalbane and containing poems composed in the 'narrow corridor extending as far as Loch Awe', then opening out to include one in praise of MacLeod of Lewis at one geographical extreme and MacNeill of Gigha at the other, it was in Bannerman's view only in the context of the Lordship of the Isles that this spread can be understood. Given the extension of Campbell power within the mainland component of this zone before the end of the fifteenth century, however, it must be questioned how real even a memory of the cultural leadership of the Lordship was amongst anyone other than the Gaelic intelligentsia.

There is less controversy in Bannerman's analysis of the fall of the Lordship. He identified two main issues that created tensions which contributed to the failure of John 4th Lord and the collapse of MacDonald power. One is widely acknowledged by all those who have worked on the history of the Lordship: the MacDonalds' 'penchant for treating with the kings of England'.⁷⁸ The other, however, is significantly more insightful; their attempts to consolidate their authority in Ross. The importance of the earldom to the MacDonalds had been recognised by all scholars since Tytler but the view generally had been that control of Ross had been secure from the outset, founded on the support within the earldom and its kin networks gained through Donald's marriage to Mary Leslie. Bannerman recognised the early success of the MacDonalds in winning support amongst leading Ross kindreds like the Mackenzies but highlighted also how longer term their possession of the earldom came to depend on their military presence and strength at any given time.⁷⁹ This general comment has been developed upon substantially by more recent scholars (as discussed below) but it was Bannerman who first highlighted the shallowness of support for the MacDonalds within the earldom. He pointed to the absence of any substantial kin network around the Leslies, who had themselves been intruded into Ross in the late 1360s, contrasting this situation with the network which marriage to Amy MacRuairi had brought for John 1st Lord and which gave their son a powerbase as head of what became the Clanranald MacDonalds. In Ross, the MacDonalds were confronted by the already alienated Ross kindred who had been separated from the comital title through the forced intrusion of the Leslies by King David II. The second factor arose directly from this lack of embedded kin network, for the only means of delivering domination was a military solution which exacerbated rather than helped to resolve the alienation of the established regional kindreds. Forcible intrusion of members of the MacDonald kindred or their main vassal families was only viable where a sustained effort could be mounted, and it emerged that the Lord of the Isles had neither the resources nor the time to commit to any sustained or systematic programme of military domination and settlement in Ross. The intermittent efforts of the MacDonalds to consolidate their grip on Ross therefore served only to sharpen opposition to them and undermine their authority there, weaknesses that were exposed to devastating effect after 1475. MacDonald efforts to recover possession in the 1480s and 1490s divided the kindred and diverted energy from consolidating its control over what remained of the Lordship, while at the same time entrenching

⁷⁷ Bannerman, 'Appendix II', 206.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 206.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 205.

opposition locally within Ross and confirming in crown eyes the dangerous unpredictability of the kindred and its role as a disturber of the peace of the realm. In Bannerman's final assessment, it was these political factors rather than any fear of the Lordship's status as the Gaelic 'Other' within Scotland that sealed its fate.

It was this contribution of the earldom of Ross to the fall of John MacDonald, as outlined by Bannerman, that was taken up by Norman MacDougall in his 1982 *James III: a Political Study*.⁸⁰ He identified a feud in the north between John and George Gordon, earl of Huntly, as a critical factor in the increasing level of disturbance centred on Ross and in encouraging the king to take decisive action, adding to the traditional case based on John's treasonable dealings with England and his illegal seizures of crown revenues in Inverness and Moray.⁸¹ Equally critical in his view, however, was the tension within the MacDonald family that Nicholson had earlier highlighted but with greater importance being placed on the ineffectiveness of John MacDonald as head of kin. MacDougall conceded that John's position was impossible but that he worsened it by indecision and inaction as, in MacDougall's words, he 'dithered from one alliance to the next in an unsuccessful attempt to prove himself an effective clan leader and Crown servant at one and the same time.'⁸² It was a theme that recurred with increasing emphasis in subsequent analyses over the next two decades.

In its strikingly negative portrayal of James III and of crown-magnate relations in later fifteenth-century Scotland, MacDougall was working very much in the Nicholson tradition. By the early 1980s, however, an alternative school of thought had emerged that was articulating alternative visions of the nature of later medieval Scotland's political community. The most forceful reaction against Nicholson's dystopian view of crown-magnate relations emerged in the late 1970s in the work of the young scholars of what has come to be termed 'the new orthodoxy', represented principally by Jenny Brown or Wormald and Alexander Grant. The most significant of these in terms of understanding of the Lordship was Grant's alternative view of its place in Scottish history. Developing from an initial reappraisal of the relations between John 4th Lord and James, 9th earl of Douglas published in 1981,⁸³ his revisionist interpretation received its first fully-developed articulation in his contribution to the *New History of Scotland* series, which was under the general editorship of Jenny Wormald. Published in 1984, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland 1306-1469* and the series in general took a thematic approach which although not entirely eschewing traditional chronological narratives was less overtly teleological and made a conscious effort to move away from the 'great man' and 'state-builder' traditions of previous generations.⁸⁴ This trend was evident in everything from the non-traditional date-range of the volume – from Robert Bruce's seizure of the Scottish throne to the end of the minority of James III – to the avoidance of reign-based chapters and exploration of broad themes, such as Highlands and Lowlands. While revisionist in perspective, Grant's re-evaluation of Highland-Lowland relations and, within that, of Stewart-MacDonald relations was neither apologetic nor eulogistic in tone. Cultural difference mattered: the Lordship was 'a self-consciously and even aggressively Gaelic institution,' whose actions on occasion

⁸⁰ N MacDougall, *James III: a Political Study* (Edinburgh, 1982).

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 123.

⁸² *Ibid*, 124.

⁸³ A Grant, 'The Revolt of the Lord of the Isles and the Death of the Earl of Douglas, 1451-1452', *Scottish Historical Review*, 60 (1981), 169-174.

⁸⁴ A Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland 1306-1469* (London, 1984).

could be regarded as threatening by the Lowlands-based government.⁸⁵ Expansionism, as displayed by the Lords of the Isles, was a cultural condition that sprang from the kin-based structures of Gaelic society; it was not a manifestation of some primordial antipathy between rival cultures. A second significant departure from traditional histories in Grant's new analysis was his shifting of the focus away from the vision of the Stewart-MacDonald relationship as a bipolar conflict between two power-blocs that represented opposed cultural and political halves of Scotland. The key to understanding why those two parties came into collision, he argued, was to recognise the significance of the disintegration of the lordship structures and kin-networks that had been established in the central Highland region down to the Wars of Independence.⁸⁶ It was the collapse of the old regime in Moray, he believed, that brought the 'essentially peripheral' Lordship into collision with their equally essentially peripheral Stewart kinsmen as both manoeuvred opportunistically for maximum advantage in a reconfigured political landscape.

In his closer examination of the MacDonald Lordship, Grant's analysis made a series of shifts from traditional perspectives. One of the most important of these was to question the notion of the Lordship as a monolithic block whose uniting identity was provided by a shared culture that was thoroughly Gaelic and kin-based in character. Whilst acknowledging the strengths of Bannerman's presentation of the growth of MacDonald power as 'a manifestation of the natural fluctuations within kin-based society,' he challenged the notion of the Lords as culturally conservative kin-based chieftains who held innovation and alien traditions at bay.⁸⁷ Most significant in his eyes was John 1st Lord's use of 'feudal' legal mechanisms to extend and consolidate his power and, by extension, to fix control of his enlarged dominion in the hands of his son and grandson, removing the possibility of descent to collaterals within his wider kin. Authority over them and over the greater landowners within the Lordship, moreover, was founded on feudal relationships defined by charters. In essence, Grant was stressing the similarity of power-relationships forged within their Lordship by the MacDonalds and those employed by crown and magnates elsewhere within the kingdom.⁸⁸

Here, however, Grant drew a line: cultural difference might not have truly distinguished the Lords' political lordship from that of their peers elsewhere in Scotland but in other aspects of their social behaviour it was of prime significance. Self-conscious projection of their place at the head of Gaelic society, a role wholeheartedly endorsed by Gaelic poets and craftsmen in their work, masked much of the cultural similarity between the MacDonalds and other Scottish lords. Strident assertion of cultural dissimilarity, perhaps especially the glorification of the violent projection of the virile qualities of Gaelic lordship, might indeed have heightened the sense of difference between Highland and Lowland peoples.⁸⁹ That difference, too, was sharpened by the manner in which their expansion was effected: exertion of military pressure; imposition of *de facto* superiority; extraction of resources; and establishment of lasting possession (often with belated formal government ratification).

Closely linked with this militarised projection of lordship in entrenching cultural difference and a detachment from Lowland Scottish political society that was more

⁸⁵ Ibid, 205.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 206-9.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 211.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 212.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 212-3.

than simply perceptual was, in Grant's view, the fundamental relationship of the Lords with the Scottish crown. For him, this position stemmed from an absence of a 'feudal settlement' between the Scottish crown and the MacDonalds in the manner that it had occurred for their former west-coast rivals the MacDougalls.⁹⁰ This is not the place to question the premise upon which that view was founded, for the research that suggests that there was a closer relationship between the crown and the MacDonalds in the thirteenth century was not available when Grant was writing. What is more important is to recognise the significance of what he saw as the underlying motivation that drew MacDonalds into what were essentially marriages of convenience with the Bruces and then the Stewarts; that timeless flawed aphorism of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend.' The Bruce-MacDonald alliance had deeper roots than their shared hostility to the MacDougalls, but MacDonald-Stewart alignment may well have arisen from their mutual rivalry with the Randolphs in the central and west Highlands. A common rival, however, did not mean common ambitions and, rather than any commitment to the Bruce-Stewart kingship MacDonald association with those families was predicated principally on opportunities for territorial aggrandisement. The result was semi-detachment from mainstream Scottish political agendas that was only managed by the crown through either forceful imposition of royal sovereignty which brought reluctant – and usually temporary - submission or *laissez-faire* policies aimed at securing co-operation that were successful for only so long as they were to MacDonald advantage.⁹¹

With perhaps too much of a teleological eye to the final denouement of Stewart-MacDonald relations in the 1490s, Grant's discussion of the Lordship concluded with an appraisal of the situation prevailing after 1431. Contrary to traditional presentations of 1411 and the battle of Harlaw as the turning-point in Highland history he saw 1431 and Inverlochy as the key moment. Grant argued that the Inverlochy campaign revealed to the Lowlands-based government that the western Highlands were probably even more of a problem without a Lord of the Isles than with him. James I, he believed, either abandoned any conscious effort to impose his authority over the region or accepted that only Alexander MacDonald had the ability to do so. The consequence of this change in policy was acknowledgement of MacDonald claims to Ross, possession of which combined with the disappearance of the alternative focal points of regional lordship in the Stewart earldom of Mar and the Dunbar earldom of Moray elevated the MacDonalds to unquestioned regional pre-eminence. The result, however, Grant saw as a possible relocation of the centre of political gravity within the MacDonald territories, with Ross taking central importance, and the emergence of Alexander, as Earl of Ross, as a pivotal figure in the government of the North. Indeed, Alexander's subsequent career could be presented as that of a fairly conventional Scottish magnate. Grant's final observation, however, was that regardless of Alexander's personal behaviour the moment for smooth assimilation of the MacDonalds and their domain within the rest of the kingdom was long past.⁹²

Of all the material on the Lordship published in the 1980s the most substantial was the edition of the acts of the Lords of the Isles by Jean and William Munro.⁹³ While

⁹⁰ Ibid, 214.

⁹¹ Ibid, 214-5.

⁹² These themes were revisited in his subsequent essay 'Scotland's "Celtic Fringe" in the Late Middle Ages: The MacDonald Lords of the Isles and the Kingdom of Scotland', in R R Davies (ed), *The British Isles 1100-1500* (Edinburgh 1988) 118-41.

⁹³ *ALI*.

the charters and other acts contained in that volume constitute one of the most valuable collections of edited sources for Clan Donald lordship between 1336 and 1493, the introduction and appendices to them provide an equally rich resource for scholars. Here for the first time was set out not just a narrative discussion of the Lords and their political relationships, but also comprehensive genealogical information, detailed analysis of their landholding, discussion of their government and administration, relations with the Church in the Isles, and diplomatic dealings with regional, national and international neighbours. With around half of their volume's 321 pages of text devoted to these discursive sections, although produced as an edition of the surviving parchment record for the Lordship, the *Acts of the Lords of the Isles* was the most comprehensive historical analysis yet produced on the subject. It was, however, a fairly conservative analysis and, with their avowedly insular perspective,⁹⁴ avoided anything beyond presentation of a synthesis of the then-current discussion revolving around the Lords' political activities on the mainland. But this is also part of its great value, for their general objectivity and the dispassionate tone of their discussion avoided the partisanship of previous commentators while nevertheless imprinting a strongly positive impression of the Lords and their achievements on their audience. Most importantly, however, the Munros had produced a tool of immense value to scholars which drew together in one gathering the surviving record evidence for the Lords and for their relationship with their vassals in both their Hebridean and mainland domain. In so doing, they set a new baseline for analysis and enabled the next generation of scholars to embark upon a rigorous reappraisal of the place of the MacDonalds and their Lordship in the medieval kingdom.

The generally positive assessments of Grant and the Munros and the portrayal of cultural Golden Age as presented by Bannerman were drawn together in the new historiography of the late 1980s and early 1990s in what seems like a rehabilitation or vindication of the MacDonalds. The synthesis offered by Michael Lynch in his 1991 single-volume history reflects the scale of the shift that had occurred in the historical mainstream perspective since the 1970s. From the Nicholson, Bannerman and Grant discussions, Lynch took the cultural distinctiveness of the Lordship, in which the MacDonalds 'fostered a renewed, self-conscious pan-Celtic Gaeldom', and the peace and stability which their rule restored to a region that had suffered political disintegration during the long years of Balliol-Bruce conflict after 1296.⁹⁵ The focus in the discussion is on the manner in which the notion of a 'Highland problem' was manufactured in the minds of Lowlanders, exacerbated by a Lowland tendency to increasingly label themselves as 'Scots' while the Highlanders were distinguished as 'Irish'. Lynch opposed this to the view in the Gaidhealtachd which on the one hand was built around a notion of a 'pan-Celtic Gaeldom' encompassing Ireland and the north and west of Scotland, while on the other it preserved an allegiance to both the idea of 'Scotland' and to the person of the king of Scots.⁹⁶ Lynch chose to illustrate this opposition between Lowland fear of an increasingly culturally alien Highlands and the Highland view of their intrinsic Scottishness with the example of Alexander Stewart, the 'Wolf of Badenoch', the third son of King Robert II and politically-ambitious for a role in the government of the kingdom but also a leader of Highland caterans and a man who had adopted many of the cultural traits of Gaelic kin-based society. His intrusion into the Highlands, Lynch argued, was just one manifestation of a long tradition of Lowland disruption of Highland society that culminated in

⁹⁴ Ibid, xix.

⁹⁵ M Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London, 1991), 67.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 68.

James IV's 'attempted eclipse' of the Lordship in 1493.⁹⁷ This quiet reversal of over a century of Lowland-centred Scottish historiography, however, was simply slipped into the discussion and left hanging.

In general, Lynch otherwise wove his account of the rise and fall of the MacDonalds into his narrative in a fairly conventional manner, following the main themes that had been set out by Nicholson, Bannerman and Munro in their overviews. On the demise of the Lordship in the years after 1475/6, however, he developed on the point first made by Bannerman concerning the tenuousness of the MacDonald hold over Ross, and MacDougall's highlighting of the earldom as the main source of conflict for the family in the 1480s and 1490s, referring to it as 'the Achilles' heel' which helped the crown to break the power of the family.⁹⁸ James III's restoration of John MacDonald to his island territories in 1476 and creation as a Lord of Parliament in 1478 he presented as an attempt to integrate the semi-detached Gaelic districts of Scotland more fully into the realm under crown authority in a manner that he suggested anticipated the sixteenth-century Tudor policy of surrender and regrant in respect of Gaelic Irish chieftains. The effort, however, he concluded was a failure, for he saw Clan Donald power in the Isles as 'barely touched' by crown or parliamentary action and it was ultimately divisions within the kindred that pitched John against first his son and then his nephew in a series of bids to regain Ross that drove the crown finally to intervene again in 1493.⁹⁹

Lynch's conclusions on the causes and consequences of the fall of the Lordship between 1475/6 and 1493 reveal several tensions in the historiography as he sought to reconcile the traditionally negative vision of mainstream Lowland convention with the more up-beat tone of Bannerman and Grant. As an overview, he was also unable to develop his discussion in depth on most of the issues that he presented as central in the debates over the Lordship's demise. It also meant that he was unable to explore less widely-accepted arguments, notably that voiced by Bannerman in the 1970s, when he had raised important questions over the stability of the Lordship from the 1430s onwards, particularly with regard to what could be regarded as a manifestation of 'imperial overstretch' in Alexander 3rd Lord's acquisition of Ross. Lynch accepted the general view that Ross was a source of instability within the MacDonald domain, but for Bannerman it was more like a lethal drug. He saw MacDonald inability to commit the resources necessary to convert titular lordship over the earldom into secure possession yet reluctance to concede that inability and achieve some form of rapprochement with the regional kindreds who held real power locally as fatally weakening the Lordship under Alexander's son, John. It was an intriguing proposition but, other than give a nod to it in their overarching narratives, no scholar had sought to test the thesis until 2000, when Norman MacDougall published his analysis of what he labelled, using Lynch's term, the Lordship's 'Achilles' Heel'.¹⁰⁰ In that paper, MacDougall developed on an idea he had advanced in outline in 1982 and presented a detailed critique of the political collapse of MacDonald fortunes from its apogee under Alexander – 'easily the greatest magnate in the entire Highlands'¹⁰¹ – to the dissolution of the Lordship under John and his would-be successors.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 69.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 167.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 168.

¹⁰⁰ N MacDougall, 'Achilles' Heel? The Earldom of Ross, the Lordship of the Isles and the Stewart Kings', in Cowan, E J and McDonald, R A (eds), *Alba. Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era* (East Linton, 2000), 248-75.

¹⁰¹ Grant, *Independence and Nationhood*, 218.

Starting with an assessment of the young John MacDonald's inheritance in 1449, MacDougall broadly accepted Grant's argument that beneath the superficial veneer of territorial supremacy within the Highlands and Islands reinforced by possession of key offices and titles MacDonald power was remarkably fragile and that along with all the lands and status John had also inherited over two generations of Crown-MacDonald hostility.¹⁰² It is MacDougall's view that it was recognition of that fragility rather than any sense of unassailable strength that led John and his advisers to negotiate his marriage to Elizabeth Livingstone, daughter of the man who controlled the adolescent King James II and effectively ran the court. Through her, the MacDonalds might have hoped for an improvement in their relations with the crown.¹⁰³ Unfortunately for John, within weeks of his marriage, Livingstone was toppled from power as the young king asserted his authority. MacDougall's discussion of MacDonald reaction to these events still follows Grant's analysis but his exploration of the king's response to the 1451 MacDonald rebellion opens a new avenue; the origins of MacDonald-Gordon rivalry.¹⁰⁴ Rather than the king deploying the 1st Earl of Huntly against John MacDonald in 1451, MacDougall argued that he was simply giving a formal 'nod of approval' to Gordon actions in a conflict for control of the central Highlands that dated back to at least 1431 and which played out in Gordon action as royal agents following the forfeiture of Ross in 1475.¹⁰⁵ In what may have amounted to recognition that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', the king appears to have been willing to concede control of land, royal castles and titles in Badenoch to the Gordons to use them as a barrier to MacDonald expansion into the same district. The principal motive on John MacDonald's part in the political conflicts first between James II and the Livingstones and then between the king and the Douglasses, MacDougall argues, was an effort to consolidate his hold on Ross. The attempted expansion in the Great Glen and Badenoch areas was designed to protect his position in the earldom and his regular presence at Dingwall and Inverness rather than in the Hebridean heartlands of the Lordship indicating that the earldom was his primary concern at this time. That James II was in no position to eject John from his gains in the 1450s leads him to conclude that the young 4th Lord must at this stage be considered a success.¹⁰⁶

At this point in the argument, however, MacDougall turns John's focus on Ross from a positive into a negative. Raising first the question of the degree to which his and his father's diversion of their main efforts towards controlling their earldom led to a waning of their personal authority within their ancestral heartlands – where local chieftains looked to alternative figures within the wider MacDonald kindred to provide dynamic leadership – he proposes that the assumption of that leadership role by his kinsmen resulted in the longer term in a deterioration in crown-MacDonald relations. With John expending his energies on Ross, his cousin Donald Balloch, lord of Dunyvaig on Islay and the Glens of Antrim in Ulster, was left to pursue an aggressive course in support of the Douglasses, mounting a destructive raid on Stewart interests around the Firth of Clyde in 1454. Donald continued to direct MacDonald policy in the Isles and in 1461-2 it was he who in MacDougall's view provided the driving force behind the negotiations that led to the so-called treaty of Westminster-Ardtornish with Edward IV of England. Through this period and down to the early

¹⁰² MacDougall, 'Achilles' Heel?', 249-50.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 251.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 252-3.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 260-261.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 255.

1470s, while Donald Balloch and his immediate family provided leadership in the Lordship proper, John was found almost entirely in Ross and Inverness, seeking to consolidate or extend his problematical heritage in the north-east. MacDougall posits the question that the MacDonalds by the 1460s were already a 'house divided' with Donald Balloch and his immediate kin challenging the position of John.¹⁰⁷ Through his focus on Ross, John had effectively yielded primacy in the Lordship proper to his more hawkish kinsman. He thereby created what MacDougall described as his Achilles' Heel, for despite John's efforts the MacDonalds' hold on Ross remained tenuous and the loss of the earldom threw him back onto the portion of his heritage in which he had neglected to maintain his personal authority.

It is MacDougall's contention that the settlement of 1476 by which John was received back into the king's peace and confirmed in possession of his ancestral lands in the Hebrides 'amounted to the real forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles'.¹⁰⁸ His authority fatally undermined by his failure to resist James III's seizure of Ross and with his own kinsmen – including his designated heir, his illegitimate son Angus Óg – jostling for the social and political leadership of the whole MacDonald kindred, John became an almost powerless onlooker in the continuing dismemberment of his heritage. Even now Ross continued in MacDougall's view to be the source of continued MacDonald weakness and division, and the cause of further conflict with the crown as first Angus sought to recover the earldom through military action in the late 1480s, then following his assassination in 1489 his cousin Alexander of Lochalsh pursued a similar course. Through all of these events, John dithered in the background, vacillating between support for his nephew Alexander – who seems to have secured recognition from most of the chieftains as head of the kindred – and making gestures of loyalty towards the king. Such indecision and incapacity to provide strong leadership, MacDougall argues, convinced the men who controlled the government of the underage James IV that a full-scale intervention in the West was necessary, a course of action also urged by the leading crown loyalists in the Isles.¹⁰⁹ The resulting forfeiture of 1493 was not, however, the decision of the energetic, teenage king as which it has so often been presented, for he did not take control of his own government for a further two years. Instead, MacDougall argues, it was the decision of his chancellor, the political maverick Archibald Douglas, 5th earl of Angus, who had succeeded in excluding temporarily the Campbells from any influence in government and who was intent on building up his own family's position and that of his Boyd allies in the Clyde estuary region at the expense of the Campbells and their associates. Forfeiture of John MacDonald gave Angus the device through which to advance that aim but, while the young James IV might have enthusiastically embraced his chancellor's scheme, in MacDougall's final analysis the king was as active an agent in promoting the decision as John had been in maintaining his own position.¹¹⁰

It is this last point that represents MacDougall's most significant departure from the traditional historiography. The reason for the collapse of the MacDonald empire, he argues, was that it had become too large to be controlled by any one individual, not because of the hostility of a succession of Stewart monarchs, and that its dissolution was accelerated by the succession of John MacDonald in 1449. He was, in most assessments, a 'minor who grew up into a weak man', incapable of asserting his

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 257.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 262.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 264-5.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 266.

headship over more aggressive members of his own family or of providing strong leadership against the hostile actions of powerful predatory neighbours like the Gordons.¹¹¹ Rather than 1493 representing the final step in a long Crown-MacDonald conflict, it was but a further twist in a still-unfolding conflict between magnate rivals for regional supremacy.

Historiographical fashion in the early 2000s has seen a move away from traditional teleological and primarily political narratives to more thematic explorations of Scotland's people and culture. 'Great men' histories punctuated with battles and feuds had little place in the modern, post-Devolution Scotland in which this new work was being produced. In the first of the early twenty-first-century overview histories of the nation, *The New Penguin History of Scotland from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, the Lordship received little mention in either its discussion of later medieval national and regional identities or of crown-magnate relations.¹¹² In a volume whose editors were acutely aware of how certain aspects of Scottish history – and also myth – have been central to the forming of national identity while others have been for various reasons omitted, there is some irony in the manner in which the historical perception of cultural difference in medieval Scotland is treated.¹¹³

More recently, discussion of the historical context for the (re-)emergence of the Lordship as a major power in the fourteenth century has returned to the focus on its place in the wider political development of the Scottish kingdom that had largely characterised the historiography of the 1960s and 1970s. Michael Brown's exploration of the rise of the MacDonalds between 1286 and the 1350s works on the premise that the rivals for power in the west Highlands and Islands were magnates within the realm, albeit ones whose territories had 'retained their own traditions and identities' and who regarded themselves as heirs to a kingship rather than simply lords under the suzerainty of a higher authority.¹¹⁴ There are echoes of an older historiographical tradition in his vision of the Lords of the Isles moving in the interstices between the power blocs of the English and Scottish crowns and capitalising on the latitude for independent action which that position gave. He makes, however, an important distinction; that the Islesmen were not simply reacting to the countervailing impulses of Anglo-Scottish policies but were the most active agents in the reconfiguration of the region's political structures. For Brown, the critical point of departure came with the death of Alexander III. His personal investment in extending his lordship over the Isles had begun the process of integrating the political structures of the region into his kingdom, a process that was advanced further through the social and political bonds forged between mainland Scottish nobles and their west Highland and Hebridean counterparts. The impetus towards integration, however, stalled after the king's death and the events of the next generation revealed how shallowly-rooted the bonds between the Scottish political community and the Hebridean magnates were.

Whilst Brown's presentation of the position of the Lordship of the Isles vis à vis the Scottish kingdom offers many new insights on its political development and cultural base it is in many ways still a very traditional discussion that juxtaposes two

¹¹¹ Ibid, 275.

¹¹² D Ditchburn and A J MacDonald, 'Medieval Scotland, 1100-1560', in R A Houston and W W Knox (eds), *The New Penguin History of Scotland from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London, 2001), 96-181.

¹¹³ R A Houston and W W Knox, 'Introduction: Scots and their Histories', in Houston and Knox (eds), *New Penguin History of Scotland*, xiv.

¹¹⁴ M Brown, *Wars of Scotland, 1214-1371* (Edinburgh, 2004), chapter 12, quote on 255.

essentially different cultures. By the time of its publication, other scholars were offering a subtly different analysis which reflected not just new scholarship but a changing dynamic within modern Scotland and the British Isles more generally. Perhaps the most significant of these new works was Simon Kingston's exploration of *Ulster and the Isles in the Fifteenth Century*, which sought to explain the power of the MacDonalds in terms of a cultural/political continuum that extended from the Isles into the Irish mainland.¹¹⁵ Although perhaps not quite as revolutionary in its methodology as its author claimed, it nevertheless represented the extension into the world of the Gaelic west of the methodologies of the New British History and, more particularly, of its non-Anglocentric dimension. Its importance was compounded by the stress that Kingston places on the need to examine MacDonald power across the theoretical political Anglo-Scottish or Scoto-Irish division that has been the traditional approach to histories of the Lordship and its place amongst the polities occupying the British Isles in the later Middle Ages. It is a sobering reflection on the nature of Scottish historiography from either a Highland or a Lowland perspective that Kingston's work was the first large-scale study to break out of a hermetically-sealed Scotland-centred bubble to analyse the ebbs and flows of the political power-play across the North Channel. This approach was made possible by a shift from a focus centred on the political entities that were the MacDonald lordships in the Isles and Antrim to the individuals who controlled these territories. From that perspective, individuals like John Mor, Donald Balloch and Alasdair Carrach cease to be men with only an episodic interest in the Scottish political scene to become figures of international significance whose periodic appearance and disappearance from the affairs of the Isles reflected their participation in greater games that demanded their personal presence. The cultural context for their activities and the mentalities surrounding lordship and the exercise of power arising from that cultural context form a vital part of Kingston's exploration of the shifting balances within the MacDonald lordship. In his exploration of *tigearnaid* and the responsibilities and perquisites of lordship represented within that shifting concept in the fifteenth century, Kingston provides a cogent thesis which explains the changing balances of power within the Clan Donald domain between the descendants of John I.

Just as Kingston was arguing for closer integration of the Ulster and Hebridean world in a greater Gaelic cultural and political zone, so Wilson McLeod was producing a reappraisal of the evidence for a single Gaelic cultural province that bestrode the North Channel.¹¹⁶ Redolent with the language of core-periphery relations (with Ireland as the core and the Scottish Gaidhealtachd as periphery) and of cultural collision and estrangement (between the Scottish Gaidhealtachd and what he terms the *Galldachd* of Anglophone Lowland Scotland), McLeod's analysis has echoes on a grand scale of Bannerman's 1970s exploration of the Gaelic cultural province within Scotland. Like Bannerman's earlier work, the focus is on the world constructed in the often introspective vision of the Gaelic intellectual elite – a veritable Gaidhealtachd of the mind – whose construction established boundaries that were perhaps far removed from the realities of either the mass of ordinary inhabitants of the Gaelic-speaking territories or of their social and political leaders who moved relatively easily between cultures.

¹¹⁵ S Kingston, *Ulster and the Isles in the Fifteenth Century: the Lordship of Clann Domhnaill of Antrim* (Dublin, 2004).

¹¹⁶ W McLeod, *Divided Gaels: Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland, c.1200-c.1650* (Oxford, 2004).

The sudden efflorescence of new histories of Scotland that appeared in the early years after the Millennium was not simply a marking of that chronological milestone; it betokened the first appearance of a new historiography for the post-1997 political prescription and the conscious projection of a single national identity that arose from that. Christopher Harvie's 2002 *Scotland: A Short History*, almost expunged all reference to the Highland-Lowland divide of the traditional literature. Reference to the Lords of the Isles was limited to an observation on the jurisdictional powers of the Scottish nobility in general which he illustrated with the MacDonalds' use of such jurisdiction to conduct themselves in the fifteenth century 'almost as sovereigns.'¹¹⁷ In Murray Pittock's 2003 *A New History of Scotland*, the deconstruction of the nineteenth-century vision of the opposition of a Germanic Lowland culture and a Celtic Highland one exposed to a non-academic readership the manner in which that thesis had been used as building-block of Unionism.¹¹⁸ Pittock's brief overview of medieval Scottish culture emphasised its hybridity and the central place that the Gaelic element within it held in the minds of the Lowland intellectual elite despite what he acknowledged was a growing 'anti-Highland prejudice' from the later fourteenth century. His interpretation is a masterpiece in the new emphasis on cultural accommodation and inclusiveness that has become a hallmark of political and social consensus in post-Devolution Scotland. Instead of the traditional catalogue of conflicts, he concentrates on stressing the centrality of the Gaidhealtachd to learned understanding of Scottish identity right up to the eighteenth century, rather than on the estrangement of Gaelic and Lowland cultures that occurred on a more popular level.¹¹⁹ In the climate of 'One Scotland: Many Cultures' in which Pittock was writing, as a device of almost limitless potential for alternative explanations of cultural difference or political power relationships at a national level, the Lordship of the Isles has found a new appeal. After almost two centuries of historiographical evolution, the vision of polar opposites that Tytler and his successors had presented in terms of racially-based incompatibilities and mutually incomprehensible cultures had transmogrified from vice to virtue; diversity, difference and social or political pluralism as manifested in the medieval Lordship and its relationship with the rest of Scotland has become a lens through which to view the modern nation's condition.

¹¹⁷ C Harvie, *Scotland: A Short History* (Oxford, 2002), 64.

¹¹⁸ M Pittock, *A New History of Scotland* (Stroud, 2003), 98-101.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 100.