

CHAPTER V — THE FAMILIES

It is now necessary to introduce the reader to some of the principal families of the glen. Whereas, in most parts of the highlands, whole areas had been the property of one family, and therefore the history synonymous with that family, in Strathardle, where much of the lands belonged to the king or the church, no one family was completely dominant, and therefore the history is rather more sketchy. While there were many families who were landowners in the glen, we will look at only the four principal ones.

The first of these to be mentioned is the Rattrays. They are thought to have come originally from Northumberland, but there has been a Rattray presence in the glen since their first mention in 1057, and part of the family are still in the glen to this day. Their main centre is, as it has always been, in Rattray, that part of Blairgowrie this side of the river — and the names of both family and district evolved simultaneously. Although the main family stronghold is at Craighall Castle, branches of the family held Dalrulzion, originally as Feuars of Coupar Abbey, and occupied a good lot of the land from there to Rattray. In the 17th century, they took tacks of land at Tullochcurran from Atholl until 1784, when it became Ferguson property, and a branch of the family stayed on as tenants. In 1483, the Rattray daughter married the Baron Ruadh, of whom we will hear much more later on, and so united the upper and lower ends of the glen. In 1534, the barony of Rattray was taken by the Earl of Atholl, after many of the clan were murdered.

There is an interesting story told concerning Christina Rattray whose cousin was bitterly jealous of her boyfriend. The cousin, therefore made a clay model of her, stuck pins in it and put it in the Dounie burn, near the waterfall. Christina became sick, but the effigy was found in time before the spell had gone too far. Then when she made a second effigy, she was caught in the act and sentenced, as a witch, to be tied to a stone in the burn. Then followed the worst summer storm on record, and in the resulting floods, both the stone and the cousin were washed away, never to be seen again.

The most famous of the Rattrays was Lachlan, a name that still continues in the family, and who lived in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The son of Alexander, laird of Dalrulzion, he was himself a historian, and has left on record certain events of interest. He was brought up at Dalnagairn, which his mother had inherited from her first husband, Robertson of Dounie, at his death.

He would look across the river at the lands of Tullochcurran and he it was who decided to take a tack of it from Atholl. He did not have much luck, and suffered a series of bad harvests, even to the extent that in one year it was covered in snow before it could be harvested, so he then moved to Glenisla and settled at Alrick.

Like most people, he fell foul of his neighbour, Spalding of Ashintully, who accused him of witchcraft, got a commission from the Privy Council and imprisoned Lachlan in the dungeons of Ashintully. He was taken to Inverness, convicted and condemned, with even the minister, John Pierson, who was married to Spalding's sister, giving evidence against him. He managed to escape and left for Flanders in 1706, returning home five years later.

Next, the Fergusons have a history of 700 years in the glen, during all of which time they resided mainly at Woodhill. They bought many other lands including, in 1511, Boreland, Finegand, and Dulmunzie in Glenshee, only to lose them all ten years later. They alternated between being big landowners and small ones, as for instance in the county rental roll of 1649, they only feature in a very small way. Their main clan centre has always been at Baledmund in Moulin, which still remains Ferguson property. One of the family, Charles Ferguson, did a great deal of research into the history of the glen, and gave a series of lectures to the Gaelic society in Inverness between 1889 and 1900. These lectures were published by the society and have provided a lot of useful information in the preparation of this book.

The Spalding family were the lairds of Ashintully, and probably the second most important family in the glen. They were a fiery, hot blooded and ruthless family, constantly at war with nearly everyone, for ever in trouble with the law, and in fact always present when there was any trouble, much of it of their own making. They came originally from Flanders, acquired land in Berwick, and then, in 1318, were given land in Forfarshire (the old name for Angus) by Robert the Bruce as a reward for their help in a siege.

In 1576, Spalding went to Flanders to fight for the King of Spain. There, he acquired considerable spoils and plunder, and in 1583, returned and built Ashintully Castle and also acquired Whitefield. In 1605 the lands of Kirkmichael, Balnauld and Baile-na-Cille (the place of the Church, and later spelt Balnakilly) were made into a free burgh of barony by James VI and conferred on Lord John Wemyss. Ten years later, Spalding acquired these lands as well. The free burgh of barony conferred on its owner the rights of the gallows, which seemingly the Spaldings used fairly regularly. They also acquired the rights to hold a weekly market on Sillerburn, as well as two annual fairs, which could last as much as two weeks. One of these fairs was held annually on the 29th September and was called the Michael Mass Fair, from which Michaelmas evolved, and which is still an important date in the Scottish calendar.

The Spaldings were up before the Privy Council at almost every meeting for their numerous misdeeds. Usually, they would not appear, would be fined in their absence, and make themselves scarce until the incident had been forgotten. Although there were laws, and penalties, there were no real means of enforcing them. Things got so bad that in 1598, the Stewarts and 26 other lairds took him prisoner and called him to trial, but, as usual he did not appear. He was denounced a rebel, in his absence, and his goods forfeited, but it is unlikely that the Sheriff Officers could even enforce this. A major feud started between them and the Robertsons. Each was called on to put up a bond not to harm the other. Meantime the plundering and killing went on. On one occasion, Spalding had lain in wait for Fleming of Bleaton, who he knew would be returning with a lot of money from the sale of cattle which he had driven south, and killed him. In order to provide himself with an alibi, he had sent his butler to Blairgowrie. When the butler returned, Spalding accused him of the murder and hanged him for it.

Then, there is the famous story of 'Fleet' Davie. Davie was a hunchback, but an extremely fast runner, and was often used as a messenger. Spalding required to get a despatch urgently to Edinburgh, and sent Davie with it. Normally, it would have taken two days to go to Edinburgh and back on foot, but because there was to be a ball at Ashintully the next day, Davie left straight away and returned at once without waiting. He collapsed from exhaustion on his return, and was found by Spalding under the table. Assuming he had not yet left, Spalding flew into a temper, drew his sword and killed him. It is said that whenever the laird of Ashintully dies, Fleet Davie is seen running along the road. There was also a curse put on that no male heir should ever be born to any Laird of Ashintully. In recent generations that seems to have been the case.

It is said that even Spalding was upset when he learned the truth about this episode, but it was certainly the start of the decline in their fortunes, until their ultimate demise in the early 18th century, which will be told later, and it is said that the last remaining widow finished up as a beggar.

By far the biggest family in the glen were the Robertsons, and by far the most influential individual was the head of the family, or clan Chieftain, baron Ruadh or Reid. As this family were the owners of most of the upper end of the Glen, it is worth devoting a bit of space to them, not only as a family, but to show the build up and operation of the clan system.

The family is said to have originated from Duncan, 'Reamhair', or Duncan the 'Stout'; (of heart rather than posture!) Duncan Reamhair was a direct descendant of King Duncan, who was murdered by Macbeth, and whose lineage continued through the ancient Earls of Atholl, so that the family retained the old Pictish title 'de Atholia', for many years. Surnames did not then exist, and while the head of the family might be called Robert de Atholia, the rest of the family would be known as the Sons of Duncan, or Donnachaidh, which is still the clan's name.

The clan were always intensely loyal to the king, and in 1308, Duncan had a son, which Robert the Bruce asked should be called after him. Then, later at the famous battle of Bannockburn, where the clan were largely instrumental in the destruction of the English army, they were given the honour of being called the 'Sons of Robert'. Therefore, the names Robertson and Duncanson are of the same family.

We have already seen that this family, which was one of the principal families of Atholl were already occupying the top end of Strathardle, or Glen Brerachan as it becomes above Kindrogan, and took part in the Raid of Angus 1389. The head of the Robertsons was then called 'Robert de Atholia'.

In 1402 the King gave a charter to Alexander, the son of Robertson of Lude, for all the lands of Straloch, Glenfernate, Inverchroskie and the Davan, or roughly speaking, from Inverchroskie to the top of the Glen Brerachan. Alexander, because of his red hair, became known as Alexander the Red, or, in the Gaelic, 'Ruadh', or in the early Scottish-English language, Reid. The red hair persisted through the generations to the present day, and the head of the Straloch Robertsons was ever after known as Ruadh or Reid.

In 1451, the estates were extended by the King when John Ruadh had uncovered a conspiracy against the King, had attacked his would-be-murderers and met his own death in the process. The King offered to give his son, Robert, as much land as a falcon could fly over. The estates were therefore extended down to roughly where the village is now.

In 1457, these lands were made into a free barony, totally unencumbered, and the outright heritable property of the family. Robert Ruadh was made a baron for arresting Robert Graham and the Earl of Atholl, the murderers of King James I.

So began the long line of the Barons Ruadh, or Reid, the heads of the Robertsons of Straloch. This was to run in an unbroken succession until the last of them — General John Reid — died in 1807.

Much will be heard of the barons Ruadh during the ensuing history. The family characteristics of each generation were remarkably similar, so that one could, in effect, be describing the life of one person who had lived throughout the period. In total contrast to the Spaldings, the barons Ruadh were intensely loyal to the King, staunch protestants, strongly anti-papist, and fervent whigs. The whigs were the traditional Scottish liberals, (not very similar to to-day's liberals), a very much middle of the road persuasion, believing in the rights of all individuals. The Barons Ruadh did not normally get involved in battles of a political nature, nor generally in matters that did not affect the Glen, but on occasions when their families, their lands or their livestock were threatened, they would not only fight, but on all occasions gave an exceptionally good account of themselves. One did not take on the barons Ruadh lightly. While they would always fight with guile in preference to force, murderers, thieves, looters and the like were disposed of with no compunction whatever.

The Spalding characteristics also ran consistently through their family, right to the end, so that in any given situation, each family would react quite predictably, although usually in opposition. Such family characteristics tend to become consistent in small isolated communities, because of in breeding, and a remarkable example of this appears towards the end of the book, which amply illustrates the point.

So we see the principal families involved in the famous and turbulent years that lay ahead.