

Balvarran
"Seat of the Baron"

The following is taken from "Some short memoirs of the Family of Straloch in Strathardle, commonly called Baron Reid," written in the year 1728.

"It is reported that when the Norwegians conquered the western isles of Scotland, many of the inhabitants being unwilling to submit to a barbarous foreign yoke left these isles and came to the continent of Scotland. Amongst whom, it is said, one Alexander Macdonell, descended of the principal family of that name, came to Strathardle and obtained a possession in the braes thereof. One of his posterity, as the report goes, and as carried down by tradition and firmly believed in that country, called John Reid or Roy, the son of John Roy, being attending the king at hunting in the forest of Cromby betwixt Athole and Braemar happened to discover a conspiracy intended against the life of the king, and being filled with zeal for the safety of the sovereign, and abhorrence of such detestable villainy, had not patience to endure the conspirators, but fell a quarrelling with some of them and lost his life in the cause. This slaughter happened near the top of a mountain of the head of Felair, which from his death is called Cairn Mhie In Roy to this day. Upon this enquiry was made, the murderers apprehended, the conspiracy discovered, and due punishment inflicted on the traitors.

The king called for the defunct's son then in the camp, and having consoled his father's death told that seeing it was in his defense that he had lost his life, he would take care of his family, and accordingly said to the boy that he would bestow upon him as much ground as a falcon hawk would fly over without alighting. The hawk was brought and let fly from the head of the Carnerory where the court or camp then was called Bialloch an Carn and flew eastward until he was above the Dour Dows betwixt Invercrosky and Kirkmichael, but before his pursuers reached him, he was come back and found on a little black hillock in Easter Straloch called Tulloch Dows where the march for that time was fixed.

I have often heard it said, that such was the delight that people took at that time in hunting and pastorage, that the boy and his friends wished that the falcon had rather taken his flight westward through the forest than eastward through the country.

The king being willing to gratify the boy asked him whether he would choose to hold the lands then given him of him, or of the family of Athole, to which (it is said) he foolishly answered that His Majesty would be at too great a distance from him when he might happen to want his keep, and therefore chose to hold of the family of Athole, the young man was immediately put in possession according to the forms then in use.

The first writing yet found out and granted to the family is a Charter granted by King James the Second to Mathilda Duncansone lawful daughter of Thomas Duncansone of Struan of the lands in Straloch called Crannach Dalchranach, Carrow and Tominturie, the fourth day of August 1451."

However, there was an earlier charter granted by King Robert III to Thomas Duncanson of Athol, of the lands of Strathloche or Easter Davache and Thomcurey, Dekarwand, Dalacharmy. Perth. (Circa A.D. 1402-03.)

Ref: The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, Volume 1., A.D. 1306-1424,
Appendix 2., No: 1793

The following comes from Sir Robert Douglas' Baronage of Scotland: "Duncan, second son of Angus lord of the isles, in the Gaelic language was called Donoch Ravir Macinnes na Coalich, that is, Duncan the fat or corpulent, son of Angus of Cowel; and his posterity were called Clan Donachy, &c. According to Mr Nisbet, Duncan Macdonnel obtained a grant of several lands in Athole, for having destroyed the wolves who greatly infested that country.

This Duncan was born in the end of the reign of king Alexander II, and it is certain was settled in the highlands of Perth-shire before the coronation of king Robert the Bruce; and having got a considerable footing in Rannach and the Braes of Athole, was very serviceable to that great prince after his defeats at Dalree, Methven &c. Duncan then resided much at Loch-Timmel, where it is said that he received and protected his majesty, when in distress; who promised, when his affairs took a better turn, to reward his benefactor.

There are many remarkable stories of this Duncan handed down, and still believed in those parts, of which we shall only mention a few. He banished from the north side of Loch-Rannoch a tribe, called Clan Yan Lea, who were in the Baliol's interest, and is said to have planted a part of that district with Macgregors. He often commanded bodies of such Perth-shire highlanders as had courage and spirit to fight for the freedom and independence of their country, whereby he considerably weakened the Baliol party, and contributed greatly to the establishment of king Robert's authority over all that part of the country."

Thomas Duncanson was the third son of Duncan of Athole and Strowan, the third baron, his daughter Matilda marrying John Reid of Straloch. After James I had been murdered in the Black Friars Monastery in Perth in the early days of 1437, Thomas Duncanson's nephew, Robert Reoch - Robert the Swarthy - and others including John Gorm Stewart pursued the murderers, capturing Walter, Earl of Athole and his fellow conspirator, Sir Robert Graham, within two miles of Blair Castle at a little rivulet, which to this day is called Graham's burn on account of that incident. The Earl of Athole was beheaded at Edinburgh in April 1437, his hoary head fixed on a spear, encircled with a crown of iron, and his titles and extensive estates forfeited.

Sir John Stewart of Balveny was next to be created Earl of Athole in 1457, James II being his half-brother. Their mother was Lady Jane Beaufort, grand-daughter of John of Gaunt and Queen of Scotland, who selected for her second husband Sir James Stewart, the Black Knight of Lorn, being a handsome graceful young man, their nuptials taking place in 1439. The Dowager Queen bore him three sons and died not long after in 1445.

In the context of the traditions of the Robertsons of Straloch, the king in question would most likely have been James II, who was a keen huntsman. The extraordinary rise in power of the Earls of Atholl after 1457, the Regality of Atholl being more akin to a kingdom within a kingdom, would explain the complete absence of any crown charters relative to the lands of Straloch between 1457 and 1668. The following is kept in the Blair Castle archives:

Letter of Reversion by John Robertson of Easter Straloch to John, Earl of Atholl, whereby the Earl is allowed on payment of 22,100 merks to redeem the lands of Dalcarn, Balangoin, Tomantruie, Kerro, half Innerchroskie with outsets called Manach and Achanchapel, half the mill of Innerchroskie, half the shealing of Coireirich and the lands of Wester Kindrogan, dated 18th June 1661.

The Memoirs of the Robertsons of Straloch and various papers relating to Alex Robertson, last of Straloch, are kept in the National Archives of Scotland at Register House, reference GD1/90. They were gifted to the Scottish Records Office by Duncan McNaughton in 1962. They were printed in D, McNaughton, "The Last Baron Reid-Robertson", The Scottish Genealogist, Vol. IX, No.1 (March 1962). The inventory to these documents gives a fascinating insight into the chaotic last few years of Alex Robertson's life, summed up by excerpts from the following letters.

1774, April 21.

Letter from Duncan MacDonald to Alexander Robertson of Straloch, Baron Reid, warning him that he can expect no further help; that he himself is already in difficulties as the Baron's principal creditor and, while Baron Reid may complain of the trust deed that he signed, it has prevented his estate from being sequestered and his being thrown into jail in his old age, although unless Colonel Reid, his son, appears, everything will go to destruction. "I never met with anything that gave me more vexation than my acquaintance with you and I hope never shall. Your conduct I can never forgive."

1775, December 25.

Letter from Alexander Robertson to Lord (blank), explaining that loyalty to the house of Argyle had ruined his family, so that he had been persuaded into signing a trust disposition, and as he was thus forced to sell his estate, suggesting that his correspondent might buy it, securing him a pension of £200 annually in return for this and his advice on how to improve the land. He mentions his son's American estate and brings up the possibility that his grand-daughter, "whose American estate is larger than all Perthshire", should marry his correspondent's son.

1781, July 28

Letter from Alexander Robertson to Colonel John Reid of the 95th Regiment, his son, commending him to God and hoping that their next meeting would be in heaven, adding, "as my last speech as on a scaffold" that he desired his son to join him in choosing arbiters to settle their affairs to his satisfaction.

The enclosed disposition dated 20th January 1783 relates to the sale by Alexander MacDonald, Writer to the Signet, to James Stormonth of the Lands of Invechroskie with the pendicles and outsetts thereof called Minach and Auchinchapples with the grazings, sheallings and common pasturage of the Forest of Corryvourich, also the mill and mill lands of Inverchroskie with the astricted multures and sequels thereof &c., also the multures and sequels of the four merk land of Wester and Middle Inverchroskie, seven merk land of Dirnanean, Ennoch dhu and Stoddart's Crofts and of the lands of Easter Kindrogan, Wester Kindrogan, Easter Straloch and the half of Glenfernet all lying within the Parishes of Kirkmichael and Mouline, Old Regality of Atholl and Sherifdom of Perth.

James Stormonth, last surviving trustee of the late Alexander Robertson of Straloch, thus bought an estate that had been in the same family since 1402, Balvarran, therefore, having remarkably changed hands only once in six hundred years. A number of deeds are enclosed illustrating the progress of title since 1783.

8th January 1819 - Disposition by the Trustees of James Stormonth, Writer to the Signet, to James Darling and Margaret Stormonth or Darling, wife of James Darling.

24th April 1824 - Sasine by trustees of the late James Stormonth of Lednathie relative to the lands of Inverchroskie &c., with an interesting reference to a charter granted by John, Duke of Atholl, to James Stormonth, registered in the books of council and session on 25th April 1796. This charter included all the lands mentioned in the 1783 disposition together with the addition of the multures and sequels of the lands of Dalcharnich, Tomnanean, Ballingoyne, Ballndrean Carrows and Tomnaturies with the pertinents thereof &c.

The enclosed Search Sheet explains the progress of title from 1895 up to the disposition by the Trustees of Patrick Stormonth-Darling, solicitor, 9 New Square, Lincolns Inn, London, to Robin Stormonth-Darling on 22nd September 1960. Included in the search is an interesting item dated 31st May 1922 relating to a Memorandum of Agreement between John George Stewart Murray, Duke of Atholl and the Trustees of the Hon. Moir Tod Stormonth-Darling, commonly called Lord Stormonth-Darling, sometime one of the Senators of the College of Justice, - constituting, in respect of a commutation of Casualties, an additional Feu-duty on the *dominium utile* of the subjects of search.