

The Legendary History of Alasdair MacColla As Received from Dugald Macdougallof Crubasdale, Kintyre, in 1825

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ABSTRACT

This legendary history is found among the papers of Andrew Crawford held in the Central Library in Paisley.

The Legendary History of Alasdair MacColla As Received from Dugald Macdougall of Crubasdale, Kintyre, in 1825

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This legendary history is found among the papers of Andrew Crawford held in the Central Library in Paisley. It is written on six folios measuring 30 x 18 cm which are bound into the eighth volume of a set entitled 'Lochwinyoch Matters'.¹ I have not come upon any explanation for the presence of this Kintyre document in the Crawford collection (which mainly consists of Renfrewshire and Ayrshire materials) and I have not identified the handwriting. The text exhibits a number of revisions and appears to be the actual record as freely taken down from the teller, Dugald Macdougall. The transcriber was perhaps translating as he went, for it seems not improbable that the history was being delivered orally in the Gaelic language, of which isolated words occur in the record.

Although it is an English-language text, and so is at a remove from the culture to which the hero and his narrative primarily belong, it has a high degree of interest as a heroic biography. John MacInnes, when writing about 'Clan Sagas and Historical Legends' in the context of Gaelic traditional lore, mentions the occurrence of this genre in a wide range of cultures, and remarks, quoting his own family tradition (Newton 2006: 60):

Probably the nearest to a full heroic biography is to be found in the cycle of stories about Alasdair mac Colla. His birth was attended by the proper manifestations. 'The night that Alasdair mac Colla was born, the swords leapt out of their scabbards, the shields clanged together on the wall, the mares cast their foals and the midwife said: "Truly this will be a great hero."'

It is a pleasure to be able to present in Dr MacInnes's honour a previously unpublished traditional narrative that recounts episodes from Alasdair's life from the time of the portents at his birth up to his last words. It is a well-structured whole, and has a special interest since it seems to be the fullest life-story that has been recorded from tradition, although there are many accounts of Alasdair and many more incidents are known than the ones included in it.

The text of the history is given below. The transcriber used small dashes in place of full stops and sometimes also in place of commas; usage has been normalised here, and capitalisation has been added at the first word of a sentence. There is some paragraphing in the manuscript, but additional paragraph divisions have been introduced for the sake of clarity. Superscript letters have been lowered. Expansion of abbreviations is indicated by underlining, and insertion by carat marks. Presumed missing letters are indicated by <>. Deletions are struck through, and illegible deletions are indicated by ~~xxx~~. Words underlined in the manuscript are shown in italics.

¹ On this manuscript, see Lyle 1975: xvi–xvii. The relevant item was marked 97 by Crawford, who numbered its pages from 1 to 12. His page numbering is given here with the text. The page numbers within the volume appear in pencil in my hand and are 123–34. A legend entitled 'The Origin of the Macalister's of Loup', written in the same hand as the history, follows it on the last folio.

NOTES OF THE HISTORY OF ALEXANDER MACCOLLA, TAKEN FROM THE RECITATION OF DUGALD MACDOUGALL TENANT CRUBASDALE 1825

Alexander Son of Col. Macdonald was born in Colonsa about the beginning ^or near^ of the 17th Century and at his birth, the same as at Glendower's the

'Frame and the foundation of <th>e earth,
Shook like a Coward'.²

The Cows calved, every Sword sprung out of its scabbard, and pregnant women were delivered of their Children. From the moment of his birth the father entertained a deep jealousy of his Son's future Genius, and to prevent all umbrage some of his friends procured a nurse who fled with young Alexander to Clachaig a small farm in Killean parish Kintyre.³ He was a straggling indolent boy running about without shoes or Stocking as ragged a little devil as was in the whole parish.

Nothing remarkable happened (at least there is no traditionary account) during his stay with the *Saor beag* or little Wright at Clachaig except ^that^ being frequently employed by the Wright ^in^ defending his Kail-Garden from his neighbour's Cattle and particularly ^from^ a very strong Bull that paid a daily Visit to it, Alister being tired of this Bull and being of a mischievous nature got hold of it and took out the *duirn fhuar* an Action only [p. 2] performed by heroes, that is he wrenched off the four feet from the knees without any instrument.⁴ He took the feet home to his Master ^or host^ and told him the Bull should no more trouble him as he had given him his feet in pledg<e> thereof, producing them at the sam<e> time as George Buchanan did the hand of the fellow that went to rob him.⁵

As he grew in years he often breathed ^a wish^ of recovering the lands in Kintyre which the Campbell's wrested from Macdonald of the Isles and in order to perfect himself in war and the use of arms he went along with Campbell of Auchnanbreck who was an Officer under General Munro in the Scottish Army that went to quell the Irish insurgents in 1643.⁶ Auchnambreck appears to have

² Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part 1*, III.1.15–17. Glendower, addressing Hotspur, says: 'and at my birth/ The frame and huge foundation of the earth/ Shaked like a coward.'

³ Crubasdale, where Macdougall was a tenant, is in Killean parish, and this history is the only known account to mention fostering in Kintyre. According to the history told by John Gillespie of Port Charlotte, Islay, Alasdair was fostered by Donnacha nan Curachd at Aoradh in Islay (Maclagan MS, p. 3174).

⁴ Cf. the bull episode in John Gillespie's history (Maclagan MS, p. 3175), and in a recording by Donald Archie MacDonald from Michael MacIntyre of Gerinish, South Uist (SA1968.147.A+B1). Matheson, commenting on the account he publishes of Alasdair subduing and slaughtering an uncontrollable cow (1958: 14–15, 89 n. 7), refers to Laoide 1914: 54, and says that, according to a Rathlin tradition, Alasdair 'twisted the feet off a bull i.e. the feat known as *a' toirt a mach an dòrn bhuar*.'

⁵ The story occurs in chapbooks. A nobleman agreed with the king that they would play a trick on George Buchanan, the king's fool, and test his courage. They sent him for a bag of money and arranged for a fellow armed with sword and pistol to rob him on the way back. George managed to get the better of the supposed robber, and he cut off his right hand and carried it to the king. The anecdote ends (Anonymous [1809]: 7):

No sooner did he come before him, but they asked him, saying, Well George did you meet any body to trouble you by the way? No, said he, but a fellow who was going to take the money from me; but I made him give his hand he would not do the like again. You did, says the fellow's master. Yes I did, says George, let the work bear witness, throwing down the fellow's hand on the table before them all.

⁶ A document dated 19 September 1642 proves that Alasdair was under the command of Sir Duncan Campbell of Auchinbreck, colonel of Argyll's regiment in Ireland (Stevenson 1994: 89–91, 159–60).

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received notice of Alister's aforesaid wish and probably having heard the phenomena that took place at his birth together with the many predictions of his ^{future} greatness by the diviners and pretenders to second sight and seeing the determined boldness with which he rush'd into every danger under his own eye, he looked upon Alister as alike dangerous both to his life and interest.

Consequently he ordered a large dinner to be prepared, to which he invited a number of his brother Officers [p. 3] and Friends among whom was Alister. The guests as they arrived ^{were to} ~~delivered~~ their arms to the host before entering into the banquetting room who accordingly claimed them, but Alister overhearing one of the Servants sing ^{some} verses of a song from which he learned that his life was aimed at,⁷ refused to deliver up his Sword, affirming that it was in the second best hand in Ireland already. The host enquired who had the first. It is here said he catching the Sword with his right hand. An altercation immediately took ^{place} between Alister & Auchnambreck which caused Alister to leave him and go to his ~~Old~~ Friend and namesake the Earl of Antrim.

About this time the Marquis of Montrose intending to engage against the Covenanters consulted an old wizard as to his future ~~fate~~ ^{success}. The wizard recommended him to procure Alister as one on whom the fates smiled propitiously and with whom he could not fail of success, telling him at the same time of his difference with Auchnambreck and the deadly hatred he bore to ~~all~~ the Campbell's. Montrose immediately wrote to ~~Alister at~~ ^{the Earl of} Antrim to send over Alister with a few men to assist ^{him} against the Covenanters. Alister received 500 men from Antrim and embarked with them for Kintyre.⁸

He intended to land at Saddale ^{and spend the night with his brother in Law Mac Kay of Ugidale},⁹ but the Wind not permitting he proceeded to Carriddle where he landed during [the] night. Alister went to Carriddle house expecting to receive entertainment for the night [p. 4] thinking they were not aware of his coming against the Campbells in an ~~hostile~~ hostile manner. He availed himself of a peep in at the Window before entering, where he saw young Carriddle flourishing his sword and preparing ^{his armour} to join Argyle against Montrose. His Mother Mrs Campbell chid him for his vanity asking him what could he do with a Sword being so young. He answered had I Alister Mac Colla here I would empale it into him to the hilt. Alister did not choose to trust himself ~~to so~~ to such an host, but spent the night along with his men.

Mac Kay of Ugadale ^{his Friend} and a ~~few~~ ^{number of} others perhaps four in number¹⁰ from whom the Campbells had taken lands went along with Alister to join Montrose against Argyle. They fell in with Montrose a short time previous to the battle of Inverlochy. Alister with his men was engaged at Inverlochy where Alister was almost overcome by an officer of Argyle's Army ^{called the Laird of Lawers}.¹⁰ Mac Kay his brother in Law seeing him thus ~~nearly beat~~ ^{said} "he never before ^{that} thought he would yield to any ~~xxx~~ alive"¹⁰ exhausted asked the reason¹⁰. Alister answered ~~xxx~~ that ^{it was} thirst that made him so ~~we~~ weak and desired MacKay to encounter the Conventer till he would find a drink, but ~~when~~ ^{as} Alister returned, Mac Kay fell [p. 5]

⁷ In other accounts, Alasdair learns of the plan to kill him through intercepting a letter (Matheson 1958: 20–23; Campbell 1898: 212–13; John Gillespie's history, MacLagan MS, pp. 3175–80).

⁸ The two landings, which took place on 7 and 8 July 1644, were actually in Morvern and Ardnamurchan (Stevenson 1994: 110, 260), but the landing was said to be in Kintyre in another traditional account (Matheson 1958: 22–23).

⁹ Mackay of Ugadale (or Ardnacross) was married to Alasdair's sister, Jean (Stevenson 1994: 55).

¹⁰ The two royalist victories of Inverlochy (2 February 1645) and Auldearn (9 May 1645) sometimes became fused in tradition (Stevenson 1994: 190), and Macdougall's history ascribes events at Auldearn to Inverlochy. Sir Mungo Campbell of Lawers was killed at the battle of Auldearn (Stevenson 1994: 182–84; cf. Matheson 1958: 32–35).

breathless on the field.¹¹ Alister ~~on~~ seeing his friend thus lifeless rushed with fury on the Officer and in a few moments he laid him at his feet. He looked not on him after he fell but rushed sweepingly on Sacrificing to the Manes of Mac Kay.¹² The field of battle was on the side of a hill and was so keenly contested that Montrose expended all his Amunition. Alister advised him to roll down stones upon the enemy with which the hill was covered. They did so and in a few moments they beat back Argyle's 'men' into a small ~~river~~ 'glen' that was behind them, that they lay so thick in the ~~river~~ 'glen' that they served as a bridge to pass over. Argyle's men fled ~~and~~. 'Next morning' some of Alister's 'men' seeing young Carridale riding hard along a hill told him that he ought to pursue him. Alister said if it was not for the Bitch that bore him and the Whore that gave him suck he would ~~put~~ 'join' the needle to the Coulter, meaning he would kill him, as there were eighteen lairds of the Campbell's fell that day.¹³ 'Argyle lost 1500 men at Inverlochy.'

Alister was with Monstrose during the whole of the war till 'after' the battle of Kilsyth, where the auxiliaries of Monstrose were loaded with spoils and returned to their homes. For an account of such '& the demolishing of Churches & robbery of arms from Glasgow' see the Scottish histories.

[p. 6] In the predictions 'by his Stepmother, his own Mother['s] midwife'¹⁴ respecting Alister it was prophesied that when he arrived at the mill of Gocumgo 'near Inverary' if the machinery went deisiuil ~~xx~~ south with the sun the<n> he would continue to prosper but if the mill went tual or the reverse of the above then his success was at an end.¹⁵ The old highland mills were more apt to turn wrong than those of our days because the water wheel was placed horizontally not perpendicular. On Alister's return to Argyllshire he having probably been in quest of some of the Campbells he ~~happend to to come through Knapdale where he~~ met with the aforesaid Mill which when he first viewed it was going the wrong way which caused a damp to fall on his spirits notwithstanding of the boldness which he ~~always~~ inherited from his forebearers.

¹¹ A variant tradition says that MacKay lost his life after he gave his sword to Alasdair when Alasdair's was broken (Stevenson 1994: 189–90).

¹² According to Campbell 1885: 226, the MacKay who was killed at Auldearn was Alasdair's nephew, Iver Mor MacKay, and Alasdair 'was so much distressed at his fate that it made him pursue the fugitives at Auldearn with an impetuosity equal to the pitch of madness'.

¹³ A letter by an Irish officer under MacColla's command written shortly after the Battle of Inverlochy reports: 'There *Aghenbracke* was killed, with 16 or 17 of the chief Lords of *Campbell*; ... four others of the name of *Campbell* taken prisoners [including] the young Laird *Carrindel*, ...' (Carte 1759: 1.76; cf. Stevenson 1994: 158–60). Archibald Campbell of Carradale or Glencarradale was among those killed at Inverlochy, and his eldest son, Archibald, who was taken prisoner, can be equated with the young man who is said in the Macdougall history to have been allowed to escape with his life (Stevenson 1994: 161, 196). Alasdair is quoting a proverbial saying given in Nicolson (2011: 5) as: 'A' cur na snàthaid air a' choltar. – Putting the needle on the coulter.'

¹⁴ 'Stepmother' appears to be used in the sense of 'foster-mother'. The passage indicates that the midwife who told Alasdair's fortune was the same person as the nurse who fled with him to Kintyre and raised him there.

¹⁵ The place of omen, Gocumgo or Gocamgo, is strongly attached to Alasdair's legend (Matheson 1958: 12–15, 52–55, 66–69; Campbell 1885: 221–2; Campbell 1898: 232–34; Anonymous 1874: 369–71; Stevenson 1994: 219–220). It is by Ederline at the south end of Loch Awe (NM86980204) and occurs on Roy's map (1747–55) as *Cochkumgoe*. Only Macdougall's history and an account taken down from John MacDonald of Brae Lochaber (Calum Maclean Project, 20 January 1951) indicate that the omen was given by the mill-wheel, with turning to the left or being idle portending bad fortune.

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Yet Alister ~~left Knapdale and~~ proceeded to try his fortunes against Campbell of Skipness to the Castle of which he laid siege for the space of six weeks¹⁶ but an old woman having told him notwithstanding of his cutting off the water from the Castle that they had sufficie[n]t quantity of all things necessary for many months Alister having no canon to batter he was forced to forbear [and] proceed down to Kintyre but he did not go far when he got intelligence that an army under the Command of General Lesly was coming to Kintyre by the west side thereof [p. 7] thereof.

Alister ~~crossed~~ being on the east side crossed the moor to engage Leslie. ~~and proceeded up the Country to meet him. Leslie had placed his men in Ambuscade in the Woods of Largie.~~ They encamped for the night in Arnad¹⁷ moor where one ~~of them~~ Clark went to see his family that was ~~only~~ a short distance from the Army. On his return he saw an apparition ~~following him with a [sword] and making as if he attack~~ before [him] ^and pursued him with his^ sword ^to^ run him through.¹⁸ At last ~~the Apparition~~ ^he^ made ^a^ desperate effort, but the stroke made no impression on Clark [the] apparition, ~~and which~~ gave a hideous shriek and Vanished. Clark as he drew nigh the army heard a mighty noise as if every one's sword was turned against his fellow but when he came to them he found them all locked fast in the Arms of Morpheus.

The next morning Alister proceeded with his men to meet Leslie. When they came to Killean Alister went in to take a dram¹⁹ but his men pressed forward. ^Two of Alister's men were on the advance and Leslie came upon them going round a hill. They could not fly, and were necissetatd to tell how far distant Mac Colla was, and it [was] upon their information that Leslie placed the Ambuscade.^ Leslie had placed his men in Ambuscade in the Woods of Largie, and the moment Alisters men were opposite them they fired the large and small guns upon them at once.²⁰ They were not able to bear the shock, but immediately wheeled and fled to Largie house. ^They thought to have been secure ~~there~~ with the walls of a great garden there because Macdonald of Largy was near.^ Leslie followed them closely and directed his ~~guns~~ ^cannons^ against ^the^ walls ~~of the~~ ^that^ surrounding the Castle as they were in the Court. They were soon driven out of the place and fled down the Country towards [p. 8] Dunaverty. Alister ~~thus~~ seeing ^thus^ his men fly and knowing it to arise partly from his own neglect was cut to the heart and an old fellow a Macalister ^of Loup^ reproached him severely for his misconduct. Alister proposed to MacAlister that they ^should^ collect their ^men^ and try them once more but Macalister ^replied^ they would not assist him any more seeing he had acted so unworthily, and ^said he^ repented of doing so much for him already. Alister replied ~~that~~ perhaps I may escape, but your Old neck will be in a few days stretchd upon Cnoc-na-muc, the common pasture of Campbellton ^which was accordingly fulfilled

¹⁶ Skipness Castle was besieged by the royalist forces in 1646, and was relieved by the Campbells, probably in May (Stevenson 1994: 221–22).

¹⁷ Although the word has been read as Arnad, the letters between 'A' and 'd' are uncertain. The name has not been identified but the context would place the moor with this name near or at Rhunahaorine (NR707484), of which the final element is *Aoireann*, 'ferry, headland or landing-place'. If Arnad were emended to Aorin or something similar, it could denote the moor by the headland.

¹⁸ The transcriber wrongly thought at first that the apparition, not Clark, had the sword.

¹⁹ Cf. Matheson 1958: 78–81; Campbell 1898: 237.

²⁰ Cf. Matheson 1958: 78–81. Leslie's troops killed sixty to eighty royalists in this Battle of Rhunahaorine fought on 24 May 1647 (Stevenson 1994: 232).

afterwards²¹ Alister about 14 miles from Campbelton at Bealacha gaichan took a small boat and went off to Ireland²² since he could not prevail upon the Army to give ^battle^ to Leslie.

The Kintyre Alisters people fled before Leslie under the command of Macdonald of Penny-land & Sanda and arrived at Dunavarty a large steep rock ^about 10 miles from Campbelton^ in the South end of Kintyre on three sides of it ^which^ is a large plain and the sea dashing on the back of it. Leslie surrounded the Dun but could make nothing of it. An old woman discovered to Leslie the leaden pipe that conducted the water to the besieged, which Leslie cut and deprived them of Water.²³ Argyle and Lesly proposed conditions of peace to the besieged that they should deliver their arms and their lives would be spared ^and liberty^. The besieged for sometime disagreed some of whom were for giving battle. The Commanding officer who was a big bellied and heavy person was sure to fall himself in the engagement if they began. He and some others were willing to surrender. [p. 9] The latter at last prevailed upon the rest they being wearied with fatigue and in want of necessarys of life and so they deliver<d> their arms.

Argyle at the same time promised that their lives would be spared shortly after which a few vessels appeared to be making for the Dun whom the besieged at last recognised to be Alister's father from Islay with a supply of men ^he^ not knowing but Alister was on the Dun. The Piper of the besieged took up his bagpipe and played the well known march of Colla nan run, Seachain an dun, Glacadh and Dun, 'S tha mis an laimh etc. Loving Col, shun the Dun the Dun is taken & I am in hand etc. which Coll immediately understood and sailed off back to Islay. The besiegers did not understand the tune but by the Colls putting about and sailing away, and they ordered the fingers to be cut off the Piper.²⁴

Some of the besieged having concealed some arms an Irishman having a gun and seeing Campbell of Skipness walking on the shore he shot him²⁵ which so incensed Argyle and Lesly that they determined from that time to massacre the whole of them which was accordingly done shortly afterward. ^About 100 Macdougall's that had never shaved were among them.²⁶ Argyle having

²¹ Hector MacAlister of Loup, Alasdair's father-in-law, was hanged there shortly after the massacre at Dunaverty (Stevenson 1994: 220; Campbell 1885: 225–6).

²² The place where Alasdair found the boat to take him to Ireland is named Bealach a' Ghaochain in Matheson (1958: 82–83). A reference by Charles M. Robertson in the Robertson Collection in the National Library of Scotland (MS370, p. 37) identifies it as: '*Bealach a' Ghaothachainn* thro' which road ascends from shoreside at Stac a Chr[ochaire]'. This point (NR68074073) is on the east coast of Kintyre half a kilometre north of Muasdale.

²³ A preliminary attack on the castle left the source of the drinking water in the hands of the besiegers. Leslie was besieging Dunaverty by 31 May 1647 and the massacre occurred in early June (Stevenson 1994: 236).

²⁴ In a study of the story of the piper's warning, Ronald Black argued that references to Dunaverty arose through confusion with Dunnyveg and tentatively concluded that this tune was played at Dunnyveg in 1615 as a warning to Coll that Sir John Campbell of Calder still held the castle (1976: 232, 234). In Matheson (1958: 18–19), the story is set at Dunstaffnage and, in this case as in the Macdougall history, the song is identified by the opening words: '*A Cholla mo ruin, seachain an Dùn, tha mise an làimh*, etc.' ('Dear Coll, avoid the castle, I am a prisoner etc.').

²⁵ Although Major Matthew MacDonald, captain of Skipness, was killed in the preliminary attack on Dunaverty, there was a tradition that he was treacherously shot when returning from a negotiation with the garrison (Campbell 1898: 239; Stevenson 1994: 236), which connects indirectly with this shooting episode set after the surrender.

²⁶ Stevenson notes (1994: 237) that 'the only list to survive naming some of the dead includes forty-nine MacDougalls among ninety names, the others named evidently being their tenants and followers'. The motif of the killing of lads so young that they had never shaved is attached elsewhere to the flight after the Battle of Rhunahaorine (Matheson 1958: 80–81).

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previous to the massacre departed ~~to get to~~ for Inveraray that he might not be present because he had given his promise that their lives would be spared. At the time of the massacre Lesly's [p. 10] men came so close to the Besieged with their cannon and other arms that it is reported that one of ~~of~~ the Besieged after both his legs were carried off killed eighteen of Leslys men by a sword he had concealed. Their bones are still to be seen and from their appearance the men must have been above the ordinary size. Alister's father was pursued and apprehended at Islay brought prisoner to Dunstaffnage and beheaded.

Alister himself skulked for a long time in Ireland on account of a Large reward being offered to any person who might apprehend him. At last being weary of life he met with two weavers²⁷ who began to interrogate him. He immediately told who he was and willingly became their prisoner. They having a poney with them bound Alister and put him upon the poney but they did not proceed far when they were overtaken by a gentleman who examined the weavers respecting the person they had bound on the pony. He judging him to be alister from his appearance and finding him to be Alister he said he was his prisoner. The weavers disputed with him for some time as to whom alister belonged as prisoner. At length the dispute being referred to Alister himself he said that the time allotted him by his maker was spent which had it been otherwise he would not be made prisoner by their superior.²⁸ The [p. 11] Gentleman immediately run him through<h> and thus obscurely ended the life of one at whose birth nature trembled, concerning whom many things were predicted, and who performed ^single^ feats of bravery against the Campbell's ^scarcely ever equalled but^ of which tradition itself has ceased to speak.

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²⁷ The mention of weavers here ties in with the tradition alluded to by Matheson (1958: 23) that Alasdair was killed by the son of a weaver whom he had killed when leaving Ireland as a blood-offering to ensure the success of his enterprise (Campbell 1898: 215–17; Matheson 1958: 22–23).

²⁸ Cf. the Lewis version of Alasdair's last words from Donald Morrison (1787–1834) in Macdonald 1975: 101. Alasdair was probably killed in cold blood by Major Nicholas Purdon after the Battle of Knocknanuss which was fought on 12 November 1647 (Stevenson 1994: 252–53).

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