

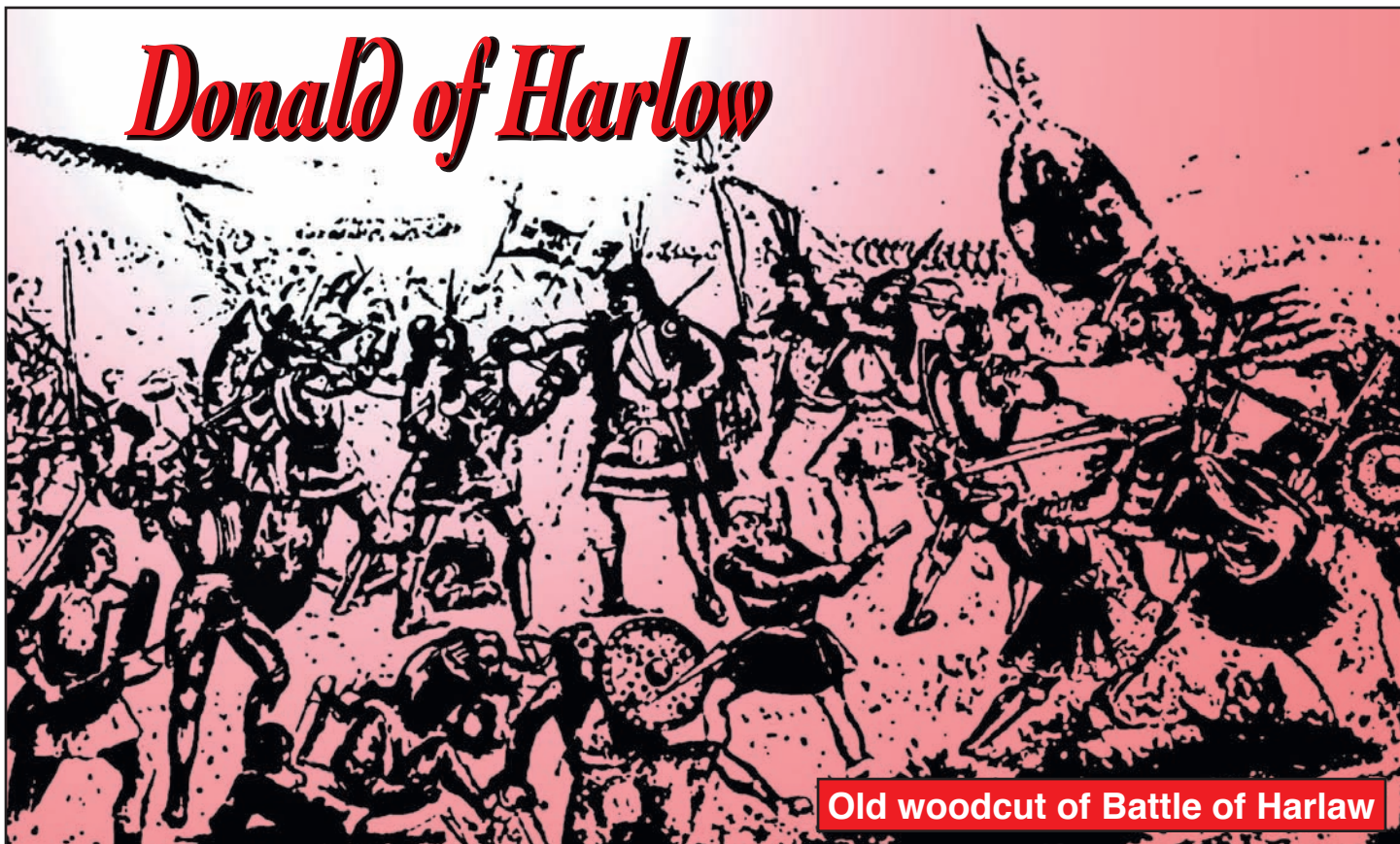
# MOUNTAIN ECHO ONLINE

*McQuiston, McQuiston,  
McQuesten, McQuestion,  
McCuiston, McCuiston,  
and other related names*



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## *Donald of Harlow*



**Old woodcut of Battle of Harlaw**

On July 24, 1411, it is said that the bloodiest battle ever fought on Scottish soil took place near Aberdeen, between savage Celtic Highlanders and civilized Anglo/Norman Lowlanders – at stake the very crown of Scotland.

The battle has been remembered, variously, as “The Red Harlaw” or “The Reid Harlaw” – the word “red” referring to the great amount of blood spilled on both sides. It has been immortalized in song as “The Battel of Hayrlau”(sic) and is known in Gaelic as “Cath Gairbheach”.

It may well be that this confrontation was ultimately over

the control of Scotland, but the typical stereotypes and motives assigned to the leaders and followers of each side may be a bit far from the truth.

Leading one band of warriors was Donald McDonald, Lord of the Isles, and grandson of King Robert II of Scotland and grandfather of our progenitor, Hugh of Sleat. He would become known to history as Donald of Harlaw.

Commanding the other side was Alexander Stewart, Earl of Mar, also a grandson of King Robert II.

These first cousins shared much of the same bloodline and each had

a claim to the Earldom of Ross, a vast territory extending north to Caithness, west to the isles of Lewis and Skye, south to Urquhart Castle and Loch Ness, and east to Inverness, with superiority over the outlying lands of Nairn and Aberdeen.

He who controlled the shire of Ross controlled the bulk of the Scottish Highlands.

Donald’s mother was Margaret Stewart, daughter of Robert II and his wife, Elizabeth Muir. Robert was, of course, a Bruce and a Stewart. Elizabeth, in turn, had a mix of some very familiar Scottish names in her heritage including Balliol and

Comyn. John Balliol was the puppet king of Scotland under Edward I of England, and it was he that William Wallace deposed.

The Red Comyn was another pretender to the throne and it is he that Robert the Bruce killed at Greyfriar's Abbey before making his successful attempt at the throne.

So in our blood we have the lines of the McDonald Lords of the Isles, the Stewart, Bruce and Balliol blood of the kings of Scotland, and the Comyn blood of another powerful contender for the crown of Scotland.

Donald of Harlaw's father was Good King John of Islay, son of Angus Og McDonald. Angus fought at Bruce's side at Bannockburn, and earned Clan Donald the privilege of serving at the right hand of the Scottish kings.

Sir Walter Scott immortalized Angus Og's service in these lines attributed to Robert the Bruce:

“One effort more,  
and Scotland's free!  
Lord of the Isle,  
my trust in thee . . .”

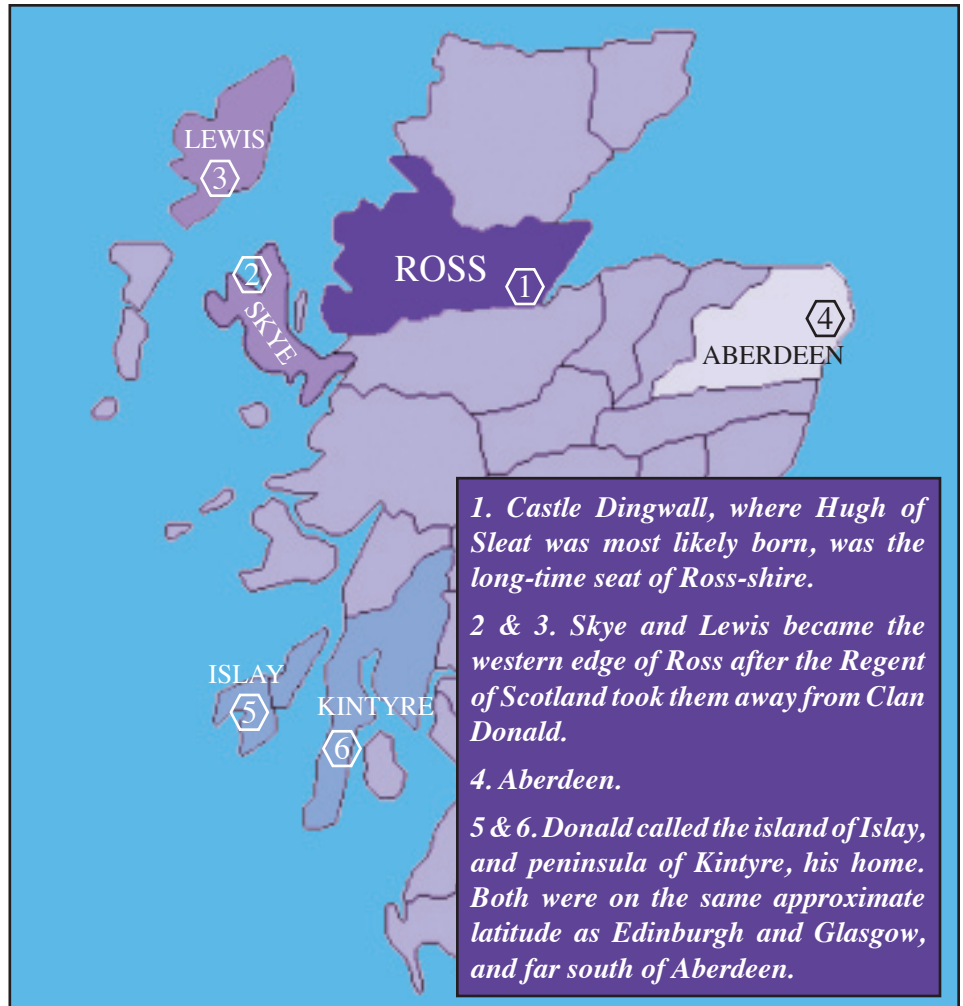
Donald was educated at Oxford University. Like his father and grandfather before him, he had a loose, intermittent friendship with the king of England.

In 1389, Donald was a party to the treaty of peace between France and England, as an ally of the latter.

On September 10, 1405, Henry IV again sent commissioners to treat for a further alliance with Donald.

Not too long before the battle of Harlaw Donald sent an emissary to speak with the imprisoned James I, the true king of Scotland, and later to meet again with the English king.

James I was being held for ransom and his uncle, Robert Stewart, Duke



The typical story told about the Battle of Red Harlaw is that Donald McDonald, Lord of the Isles, later known as Donald of Harlaw, came down from the Highlands with savage Celts to attack Aberdeen and eventually take over all of Scotland.

The map, above, clearly shows that Islay, Donald's main home, is far south of Aberdeen and actually very close to Edinburgh. Donald had 10,000 troops. It is very likely, had he really had his sights on taking over Scotland, that he could have easily traveled just a short distance east to Edinburgh and taken over the kingdom of Scotland, which at the time had no real king, King James I being imprisoned in England.

In addition, Donald was English-speaking and was educated at Oxford University. He was a friend of the king of England, and had tried to facilitate King James' release. The truth is seldom as it seems.

of Albany, seemed content to let him stay a prisoner, while Albany ruled Scotland as Regent.

During this period, Scotland had become quite disorganized. Donald, and others, looked to England to either release James or to step in and quell the violence and confusion.

As Scott put it, in his poem "Lord of the Isles", Donald continued the

family legacy of being . . .

“The mate of monarchs,  
and allied,  
On equal terms,  
with England's pride.”

Leona McQuiston reprinted these words in her family geneology book of 1937.

Although Donald is typically said to have been leading a band of savage Celts at Harlaw, about the only thing purely Celtic about him was that his area of Scotland generally still spoke the old Gaelic or Celtic language, although he himself was versed in Gaelic, English, and Latin.

In Aberdeen, it is true that the Scots language, based for the most part on English, was the principal language at the time of the battle. However, even as late as the reign of James VI, the king boasted that his kingdom had a town whose only street was so long that people living at one end could not understand the language of the people living at the other end. He was speaking of Nairn, just north of Aberdeen, which was still split into Gaelic and Scots-speaking areas even this many years after Harlaw.

In 1411 there was not yet such a delineation between Lowlander and Highlander, as most tales of Harlaw would lead one to believe. Instead, there was an amalgamation of races throughout Scotland, slowly separating into old and new cultures.

In addition to its Celtic origins, Clan Donald was heavily infused with Viking blood. Through his mother, and through earlier marriages in his family line, Donald also had his share of Norman and Anglo-Saxon blood through the families of Bruce, Stewart, Muir, Montgomery, Balliol, and Comyn. In fact, his veins were a melting pot of nearly every major race to ever occupy Scotland.

Donald is also said to have been leading a horde of Highlanders from the north with an aim to take over all of Scotland. While Donald did descend on Aberdeen from the north, his home base was on the Isle of Islay, latitudinally on par with

Glasgow and Edinburgh, and far south of Aberdeen.

Had Donald intended to steal the crown of Scotland he could have traveled a much shorter distance to Edinburgh by simply heading east. Instead, he followed the Great Glen to Inverness because his goal was, as evidence would seem to indicate, to regain the shire of Ross, not to conquer Scotland.

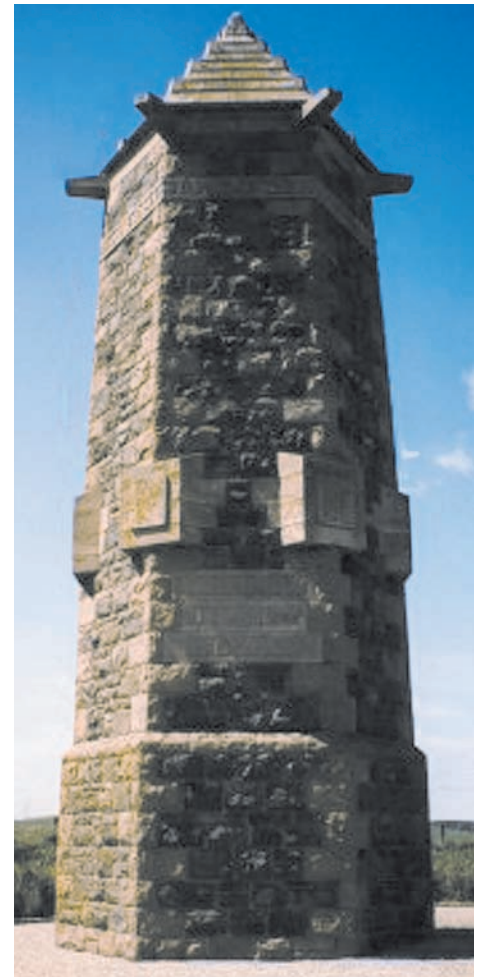
To paint Donald as a savage Celtic-speaking Highlander bent on the conquest of all of Scotland is to grossly simplify his nature and intentions.

Clan Donald and the Bruce/Stewart dynasty were linked in the marriage of John McDonald, Lord of the Isles, and Princess Margaret Stewart. John eventually received confirmation of his charters to most of the western isles and much of the southwestern coastline of Scotland. Included in these lands, for the first time in Clan Donald history, was ownership of the Isle of Skye, held by Donald's brother, Godfrey, from 1389 until 1401, at which time Skye was declared part of Ross by the Regent.

Good King John is first on record using the title "Lord of the Isles", although his ancestors had been styled "Ruler of the Isles" and "Thane of Argyll". Donald followed his father as second Lord of the Isles.

Only ten years had passed since Skye had been taken from Clan Donald, by Albany, when Donald made his bid for the entire Earldom of Ross. Donald's principal claim came from his marriage to Margaret Leslie, daughter of Sir Walter Leslie and his wife, Euphemia, Countess of Ross.

Euphemia's father, William, the 5th and last Earl of Ross from the old de Ross dynasty, died without male



*The memorial at the site of the Battle of Red Harlaw unfortunately only commemorates the Aberdeen heroes and ignores the 1,000 or more troops of Donald who died that day.*

issue, leaving Ross in her hands. Euphemia's mother was none other than Mary McDonald, daughter of Angus Og McDonald and an aunt to Donald of Islay. Euphemia was his first cousin.

Donald was also related to Euphemia through the Bruce line. Her paternal grandmother was Matilda Bruce, daughter of Robert the Bruce; an aunt to Donald's mother, and a great aunt to Donald.

Therefore, Donald McDonald and his wife, Margaret Leslie, were first cousins, one generation removed, through the line of Angus Og McDonald, and second cousins, once removed, through the line of Robert the Bruce.

It seems Donald of Harlaw had an interest in Ross from several points of view.

Beyond his relationship to these people, Donald also realized that if Albany or other members of the Stewart family were to add Ross and Skye to their already vast landholdings north of the Grampian Mountains, and to their control over the government at Edinburgh, Donald would be hemmed in on all sides. He stood to lose not only his old connection with Ross and Skye but even his foothold in the western isles and along the western coast of Scotland.

In addition, Donald may have been reclaiming Ross in the name of the true king of Scotland, James I, who languished in English custody for eighteen years while his uncle, Albany, served as the “false king” of his domain. It was not long before Harlaw that Donald’s representatives spoke to both the prisoner, King James I, and to his captor, the king of England.

The death of Sir Walter Leslie, in 1402, saw the earldom pass legally to his only heir, a daughter also named Euphemia – a “sickly, hunchbacked child”. This younger Euphemia was taken into custody by the Regent, Duke of Albany, and he began to make provisions for her rights to Ross to be passed on to his son, John Stewart.

On the death of her husband, the Countess of Ross remarried to Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchan, a son of Robert II. Alexander became known, in later years, as “The Wolf of Badenoch”. His Buchan lands were very near to Ross and he immediately claimed the shire as his own.

Euphemia’s son, Alexander Leslie, recovered Ross for a short time but complicated matters, even



*Above is Urquhart Castle, under McDonald control for 150 years and part of Ross-shire. At left is all that remains of Dingwall Castle, the ancient seat of Ross.*

*Donald of Harlaw’s son eventually became Earl of Ross and his grandson Hugh of Sleat was mostly likely born in Dingwall Castle.*

more, by marrying Isabella Stewart, daughter of Robert Stewart, the Regent. Isabella was another grandchild of Robert II since the Regent was also a son of King Robert II.

The Stewarts now had three claims to Ross, one through the Regent’s son, John Stewart, one through the Wolf of Badenoch, Alexander Stewart, and one through Isabella Stewart.

Robert II had many children, some legitimate, some not, including Robert Stewart (Regent of Scotland and Duke of Albany), Margaret Stewart (wife of John, Lord of the Isles), and Alexander Stewart (the Wolf of Badenoch). Several of his children were married off to noblemen and heiresses in an attempt to cement his hold on Scotland. The end result, however, was the creation of many conflicting

claims, including the claim to Ross.

Another son of Robert's was John, Earl of Carrick, who succeeded to the old lands of the Bruce family, and later to the kingship of Scotland, as Robert III. James I was the young son of Robert III and, while being spirited away to France for safekeeping, was captured by privateers working for England, where he became a prisoner under a heavy ransom. Robert III died shortly afterwards, literally of a broken heart. His brother, Robert Stewart, thereby assumed the regency of Scotland in the absence of James.

Albany's brother, Alexander Stewart of Buchan, the Wolf of Badenoch, earned his name, in part, when he attacked the royal burgh of Elgin, ravaging its cathedral, while leading a band of "wyld, wykked Heland-men". Elgin is located on the road between Nairn and Aberdeen. It seems this Alexander Stewart was more of a leader of savage Highlanders near Aberdeen, than was Donald of Harlaw.

Alexander had a son, also named Alexander Stewart, who became Earl of Mar by nefarious means. It is said that he conspired in the death of the former Earl of Mar, stormed his castle and forced the earl's widow to marry him, and to sign over the Earldom of Mar. It was this younger Alexander Stewart who was chosen to face off against Donald of the Isles, at Harlaw.

The Earldom of Mar was located in the shire of Aberdeen. Buchan was nearby. This father and son pair of Stewarts had a vested interest in seeing that Aberdeen and Ross remained under Stewart influence.

The small village of Harlaw was located about 18 miles from Aberdeen and just happened to be the place Donald rested before

attacking the town. The younger Alexander Stewart, who met Donald at Harlaw, was the leader of hundreds of knights and warriors from many illustrious families in the Aberdeen area.

Donald's force has been estimated at about 10,000, although some have taken poetic license and placed the number at 20,000, and even 90,000. He is said to have left the isles with 6,000 of his best warriors and collected additional support and troops from the Macintoshes, Mackenzies, Macleans, Camerons, and Clan Chattan along the way. The chiefs of Macintosh and Maclean were among the estimated 900 to 1,000 men, from Donald's side, who lay dead on the field after the day-long, bloody battle. Several women who were following this group were also slain.

The Earl of Mar's force has been typically estimated at 1,000, and sometimes as up to 2,000. Again poetic license has had his force reaching 60,000 at one point, but 1,000 or so warriors seems the more credible number. This group included many knights, much more heavily-armed than Donald's men, thus accounting for their ability to stall his advance.

Since the main accounts of the battle came from Aberdeen residents it is possible that the actual number of warriors on each side was more evenly matched and that Donald's forces were exaggerated. Still, he outnumbered his better equipped opponent, substantially.

Mar's troops left an estimated 600 dead on the field, with very few returning home. With such heavy losses both sides most likely incurred a large number of wounded, too. In fact, it is said that not a single warrior from the Aberdeen area escaped without some type of

wound and that "hardly a leading family in Aberdeenshire but lost a laird or son."

Included in the dead for this group were the Provost of Aberdeen, Sir Robert Davidson, along with the Lords Saltoun and Ogilvy, James Scrymgeour, Constable of Dundee, and the Irvines of Drum, who were literally wiped out. The Lord Marischal, from the Keith family, was captured and died a prisoner. Many other brave knights, burgesses, and common folk sacrificed their lives to save Aberdeen.

Some have said that, had Donald been satisfied with recovering Dingwall Castle and Inverness, he might have reached his goal of regaining Ross. However, there are at least two reasons why Donald may have decided to attack Aberdeen.

First, an army travels on its stomach and Donald's group of 10,000 strong must have eaten every available scrap of food from the Great Glen to Harlaw, over the several months of his campaign. Aberdeen was a substantial commercial town by 1411, and the thought of something as simple as a good meal, and a few spoils of war, may have been a deciding factor.

Secondly, the summer fighting season would be closing soon and crops were in the field, at home. Donald could not allow a force, which was formed specifically to thwart his objective, to stand, or even worse, to follow his weary, scattering troops back to their homelands. His only choice was to attack and decimate the enemy, now, while his troops were organized and superior in numbers.

Mar met Donald in the morning before he could begin his march toward Aberdeen. There seems to have been no attempt at strategy on either side. The two groups simply

charged at one another and hand-to-hand combat ensued. While the Aberdeen knights were able to break through Donald's line, his men attacked them from behind, with battle axes and pikes, pulling many from their horses to the ground. Still, their armor and fighting skills allowed them to hold Donald at bay.

All day the battle raged. Individual contests between heroes from each side ruled the field. By nightfall, with both sides suffering many casualties, Donald retreated. In the following days he made for Inverness, and from there he returned to the isles.

Within a few years Albany died and James returned from England. One of his first orders of business, as king, was to execute most of the remaining members of the Stewart family who had delayed his ransom. Donald's son, Alexander McDonald, served on the jury which sentenced the Albany Stewarts to death.

As time went on, James I began arresting and often executing other Scottish noblemen. One of those he captured was Alexander McDonald, who he imprisoned for a short while. On his release, Alexander attacked Inverness in retaliation, and was once again arrested. This time he pleaded for his life, in his underwear, with a sword point held to his throat – the handle offered to James I.

Alexander's life was spared again and eventually he advanced to the titles Lord of the Isles, Earl of Ross, and Justiciar or Sheriff of the Highlands. Donald's son had become one of the most powerful men in all of Scotland.

The current chiefs of Clan Donald, and of Clan Uisdean (the McDonalds of Sleat), are descended from Donald's grandson, and

Alexander's son, known as Hugh of Sleat. McDonald of Sleat is also the premier, or longest-standing, barony of Nova Scotia, dating from 1622.

While Donald of Harlaw may not have necessarily been leading a "savage hoard of Celtic Highlanders bent on capturing the crown", he was, more likely, a well-educated, highly-placed member of the royal family defending his claim to Ross, and defending what he considered to be the real and true Scotland.

*Upper right is the coats of arms of the Earl of Mar who led forces against Donald, at the battle of Harlaw. The man, Alexander Stewart, had gained the title of Earl of Mar through treachery.*

*He is said to have had a hand in the death of the previous Earl of Mar and then attacked his castle and forced the Earl's wife to marry him and to sign over the area of Mar and the title to Alexander.*

*Below center is the coat of arms of Donald of Harlaw, one of many arms owned by Clan Donald. This*

*one shows the typical lion rampant denoting descent from the Royal House of Scotland. Lower right is an often-used image of what the Lord of the Isles may have looked like at some point. Which Lord this is meant to represent is unknown although the best clue is that it may well have been Donald as the title of the image has "Maclan" on it, meaning "son of John".*

