

How the Campbells came to Skye

A story from the Dewar Manuscripts at Inveraray Castle, translated from Gaelic by Ronald Black.

Cameron of Lochiel was once holding a wedding in Lochaber, and many of the Scots nobility were at it. When the dinner was over, there was a lot of drinking. While the noblemen were getting drunk, some of them began to boast about their ability at fencing with a sword.

MacLeod of Harris was there, and when he heard certain other noblemen boasting, he put in a word himself and said he wasn't afraid of any man with a sword. However at that time MacLeod was merely a youth who hadn't reached manhood. One of the other noblemen told him he was daft, and MacLeod spoke in a boastful way, as if he were issuing a challenge to all and sundry who were there. And there was a sturdy gentleman there who took MacLeod at his word to fight him next day.

Big John son of Donald Campbell of Asknish was at the wedding, and when it was time to go to bed, he lay down in the same bed as MacLeod. Now and again through the night, Big John Campbell would give a start. MacLeod said to him,

"I don't think you're sleeping."

Big John Campbell said, "No, I'm very afraid for you. It's a massive warrior of a man who's going to fight you tomorrow, and you're still just a boy. I'm terrified of letting a lad like you into a sword-fight with a hardened hero who has such long experience of dueling with blades. It would be better for you to let me go in your place. I'll fight him and if he gets the better of me, it can't be helped."

What other conversation passed between them is unknown, but next day, Big John and MacLeod stayed close to each other. The other warrior arrived to give battle with MacLeod, and Big John Campbell said to him, "You blackguard, are you looking for a fight with MacLeod when he's little more than a boy yet? You'll be assuming he's easy to beat. But I'll fight you, and we'll see how it works out."

Big John Campbell and the warrior joined in battle, but had exchanged only a few blows when John Campbell killed the warrior. And MacLeod felt himself so much in debt to John Campbell that he brought him with him to Dunvegan.

In those days, MacLeod had a lot of land, and he gave John Campbell title to Harris

for as long as he lived, free of rent. And MacLeod gave John Campbell's sons a lease of land for rent; and the progeny of John Campbell, son of Donald Campbell of Asknish grew plentiful in MacLeod's country and in the Isle of Skye after that. It was one of them that MacLeod used to have as falconer to train hunting hawks, and he had a township of land from MacLeod for that. And MacLeod had another of them called Duncan of the Craggs for going to the rocks where the hawks' nests were, to take the young hawks out of the rocks. He had a shoulderpiece for his shoulder and a steel helmet to protect his head and shoulders from the splinters that would fall out of the rocks. Things stayed like that until falconry went out of fashion and people began hunting with guns and dogs. But MacLeod would always have a man of the race of John Campbell son of the laird of Asknish as his boatman and as the skipper of his galley.

Donald Campbell of Asknish, from whom were descended the Campbells who came to live in MacLeod's country and in the Isle of Skye, was descended from the laird of Barbreck at the foot of Glen Domhain.