

THE CLAN OF MACNAB



Let fear be far from all.

IN the ancient Gaelic genealogy, so often referred to, this clan is deduced from Ferchar, son of Feredach, and in Gaelic they are called *Clan-an-Aba*, from their chief ancestor having been the Abbot of Glendochart, who lived between 1150 and 1180. As his lands were within the glen of that name, they were inherited by his descendants. "It does not follow that being an Abbot, he was prevented from marriage or holding property," says Robertson; "the contrary was common in these remote times." We doubt this, as St Gregory the Great, 604, was always a zealous assertor of the celibacy of the clergy (Alban Butler, vol. i.).

The Abbot of Glendochart was a man of such consequence that in the reign of William the Lion he was joined with the Earl of Athole in having the rule and management of Argyleshire, at that time when the royal authority could not be intrusted to any one belonging to that wild and warlike district.

The MacNabs having joined the MacDougals, Lords of Lorn, against Robert I., suffered the loss of the greater part of their lands; but they still retained a small portion, called Bowaine or Bovan. This is probably the place referred to in a charter by David II. "to Gilbert M'Nabbe, of the lands of Bathmachin, in vicecom. de Perth," page 34 of Robertson's Index. At Inch Ewen, in Breadalbane, says General Stewart (in 1822), "a family of the name of MacNab had occupied the same farm for nearly four centuries till within these last few years, when the last occupier resigned (Sketches of the Highlanders, vol. i.)."

During the reign of James IV. the MacNabs and the Neishes, in the vicinity of Lochearn, had been at bitter feud. In Robertson's Index there is a charter to Murthaci MacNieache of the lands of Crossard, Perthshire, in the time of Robert I., thus showing that the tribe was an old one. Skirmishes between the clans had been frequent, and at length a regularly pitched battle was fought between them on the confines of a glen north of the foot of Lochearn. In this both tribes mustered to a man, disdaining to ask for quarter, receiving none, and all fighting for vengeance. Victory declared for the MacNabs; only a remnant of the Neishes escaped; and their chief fell, covered with wounds, after many of the MacNabs had been slain by his sword. A large stone marks the place where he fell, and on this, the credulous say, the stains of his blood are still visible.

On an island in Lochearn the remnant of the Neishes took shelter; their head was an old man, a near kinsman of the late chief, and they lived by plunder. In the time of James V. the chief of the MacNabs, who lived in Kennil House, sent a gillie to Crieff for provisions at Christmas time; but on his return he was waylaid and robbed by the Neishes. MacNab of that Ilk, whose eldest son John was ironically known as *Ian mian Mac an Aba*, or "Smooth John MacNab," had twelve sons, all men of great strength. These young men were gloomily meditating revenge in the evening, when their father entered and said, "*Bhe'n oidch an oidch, n'an bu ghillean na ghillean*" (The night is the night, if the lads were the lads). The dark hint was taken; each belted on his arms, and led by their brother John, they carried a boat on their shoulders from Loch Tay to Lochearn, on which they launched it, and rowed over to the island.

In the House of the Neishes all was dark and silent. Smooth John dashed open the door with his foot; and rushing in, the twelve brothers put every man therein to the sword save one and a boy, and cutting off their heads, returned with all the plunder they could collect to Kennil House. There Smooth John held up the head of the chieftain of the Neishes, exclaiming, "*Na biohd fromgh, oirbh!*" (Be in fear of nothing); and old MacNab, while contemplating the bloody heads with extreme complacency, said, "The night *was* the night, and the lads *were* the lads!" (Antiquities of Strathearn, Perth, 1836, etc. etc.)

In 1578 caution in 500 merks was found by Colin Campbell of Airdbaith, for "Allestar Barryth Maknab, son of Allestar M'Nab (*sic*), that he will appear upon the 3rd day of the nixt justice aire of the Sheresdome of Perth, to underly the law for all crymes that may be imput to him" (Privy Council Register).

When Montrose was in arms for the King in 1645, among the clans who joined him at Fordoun in 1645, Menteith in his "History of the Troubles" mentions "the clans of Mackgregor and Macknab, with a good number of the Farquharsons of the shire of Mar." In 1646 John MacNab of that Ilk, with his clan (according to the Douglas Baronage), with Lord Napier and Drummond of Balloch, garrisoned Montrose's patrimonial Castle of Kincardine for the King. On this Major-General Sir John Middleton drew off a body of infantry and cavalry with a battering train from Stirling, and bent the guns on the castle from the opposite side of the glen. For fourteen days the MacNabs defended the fortalice, till the concussion of their firearms caused the water in the well to subside, on which they all made a sally forth on the night of the 14th March, and cutting their way through Middleton's guards, escaped to join Montrose (Guthry's Memoirs). John MacNab of that Ilk, though leading 300 of his clan, was taken and sent to Edinburgh; but escaped to die on the field of Worcester (Scottish Baronage).

In 1654 the Laird of Glenorchy was empowered by General Monk to make up certain losses he had sustained out of the chief of MacNab's estates, "and to assist in putting the haill Maknabs out of the country," dated Dalkeith, 21st November.

On the 18th of the same month there was another letter written by Monk to Glenorchy, "desiring him to forbear to trouble the widowe of the deceased Laird of M'Nab, as she has paid sesse and lived peaceably since her husband's death." And this protection was also given to Archibald MacNab of Agharm (Transact. Soc. Antiq. Scot. vol. vii.).

In 1783 Francis MacNab of MacNab and that Ilk presented to the Antiquarian Society of Scotland a curious Highland purse-clasp with a pair of pistols secreted in it, so any stranger attempting to open it would receive the shot through his hands. This purse-clasp suggested to Sir Walter Scott the apparatus for guarding the purse of Rob Roy, when he says to Bailie Jarvie, "I advise no man to attempt opening this sporran till he has my secret."

The last descendants of the ancient chiefs are now settled in Canada.

The old burial-place of this tribe is at Killin, immediately below the bridge that spans the Dochart, on a picturesque island covered with fine sward and shaded by pine trees, amid which are what seem the remains of an ancient chapel; but, save one, no stone or memorial is there. It is a little marble slab built into the wall, to the memory of a son of MacNab of that Ilk, Francis Maximus MacNab, Lieutenant of the Gordon Highlanders, killed at Almeida in 1811. As his regiment was not there, he must have volunteered for special service.