Mac Donell of Barrisdale

By Kirk MacGregor

Mac Donell lord of Barrisdale you drove your clansmen to Hackmaile to raise the silver for their needs... by lifting fastened kye, it fell about Michaelmas moon, the divers they were coming soon to drive the kye to try ting fairs at Crief and Connie fair Aye Mac Donell and all your clan you're rascals each and every man when Rory Thyrr brings down his band we'll no see you again.

Aye Mac Donell's men stood little chance as Rory's clansmen did advance their
glooms made their heads dance on the slopes of Ben Acher down your head and grieve Aye Mac Donell and all your clan the rascals each and every man when Rory Thyrr brings down his band we'll no see you again.

Aye Mac
MacDonell, Lord of Barrisdale, you drove your clansmen to blackmail,
To raise the silver for their rents by lifting fattened kye;
It fell about Michaelmas moon, the drovers they were comin' soon,
To drive the kye to trystin' fairs at Crief and Comrie fair.

Aye, MacDonell and all your clan, you're rascals each and every man,
When Rory Mhor brings down his band, we'll no' see you again.

MacDonell's men took to the hill, the night was dark,
The wind was shrill,
Tae lift black cattle frae the lands of Rory Mhor MacLean;
They roamed the hillsides and the glens, each heather hill and bracken ben,
Until they found a dry-stane pen wi' five and fifty kye.

They drove the cattle frae the pen and moved them swiftly down the glen
But the noise it wakened Rory's men, wha after them did flee;
Old Rory Mhor and a' his kin he's chased them o'er each loch and lynn
Until a battle did begin on the slopes of Ben Achree.

MacDonell's men stood little chance as Rory's clansmen did advance;
Their claymores made their heads to dance on the slopes of Ben Achree;
MacDonell, man, you might have kent your clansmen couldna pay their rent;
It's tae their deaths them a' you've sent; hing doon yer heid and grieve.

Kirk MacGeachy, author of the song and member of the Montreal-based group “Orealis”, tells us this about it:

“This song is about one of the many lawless activities practised by the Scottish clans in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was called ‘cattle lifting’. The word ‘lift’ in Scots means to steal – cattle lifting refers to the theft of cattle (‘kye’– old Scots). Some clans actually used this as a means of paying rent to their chieftains. Instead of paying in silver (which most of them had little or no chance of raising), they paid in black cattle, which they stole from rival clans. The term ‘blackmail’, meaning ‘black rent’, originated here. The most notorious cattle thieves in the Lochaber region, where Barrisdale is situated, were the MacDonells. Their chief, MacDonell of Barrisdale, is rumoured to have raised an annual income of around 500 pounds through receipt of stolen cattle. This song tells of the sad plight of some members of the MacDonell clan, who were put to the sword for stealing cattle.

“Most raids took place in late September (Michaelmas), when the cattle were in a fit condition for the markets in the south at Crief and Comrie. The full moon around this time created ideal conditions for night raids.

“(Some chieftains paid in black cattle to raiders as a form of protection, to ensure that their lands would not be raided. In some areas the services of the military – Black Watch – were enlisted to police clan lands.)”

The song can be heard on “Orealis”, available in cassette from the CFMS Mail Order Service, $10.00 members, $12.00 non-members.