

# THE MACNACHTAN CASTLE ON DUBH LOCH

## INTRODUCTION

By Ken McNaughton

Dubh Loch drains via a short river into Loch Fyne, a couple of miles north-east of Inveraray, Argyll. Matthew Cock wrote a chapter about the Macnachtan castle there in a 1998 publication [1], which is a good place to start a contemporary review. This is an update of such a review [2]. Cock put a reference number at the end of each of ten sentences (MC54 to MC63). These are sometimes cryptic and confusing. Some of his numbers refer to two or three references and some are repeats. Here are his key passages, in italics, and my analysis. I have attempted to rationalize his references in the list at the end.



**Figure 1. This crannog in Loch Awe, after being deserted for centuries, is green and rounded.**

MC 54. *“The MacNachtans must have grown fond of their island site on Loch Awe [Fraoch Eilean] and decided to build another island castle here on the Dubh Loch, for though now part of the shore-line, at that time the mound they chose was completely isolated.”*

At the end of this sentence Cock acknowledges Ref. 3, which is discussed in Ref. 6. The sentence suggests that the castle was built on a crannog. Crannogs were artificial islands built in a body of water for residences or forts. After centuries of desertion in a body of water, they take on a distinctive rounded green shape, as seen in Figure 1.

There is a Website for the RCAHMS [4]. A search of the Canmore database under the “Dubh Loch” site for a “castle” shows one result in Glen Shira, Argyll and Bute [5], which has two prints:

DC24803 from the Argyll 7 collection is a 1984 pencil plan on a scale 1:400, organization and copyright RCAHMS.

DC24581 is a pen plan publication copy of DC24803 made in 1990.

The pencil plan in 1984 may have been done onsite and the 1990 one in ink probably does not contain any new information. A copy of the 1984 plan is shown in Ref. 6. It appears to be a mound just west of a shoreline, 60 x 80 ft, oriented WNW by ESE. There is no indication of its exact location on the loch but a note says it is 200 m NNW of the bridge, which would place it close to the western shore.



Figure 2. The Pont Map (1583-1595) shows a settlement (rectangle) just off the south western shore of Dubh Loch (National Library of Scotland).

MC 55, pp. 44ff. *“It was only in the mid or late 18th century that the area around the Loch became less marshy, when the river bank was cut straight and the outflow of the Loch into the Gearr Abhainn (Short River) widened, after a freak flood had carried a mass of gravel and silt down from the moor and choked the bridge.”*

Cock attributes this sentence to Ref. 7, a copy of which I have. On page 44 Campbell actually says “a remarkable waterspout took place in the glen about a century ago [i.e., around 1785], when a stream in the moor brought down such drift that it choked the bridge on the highroad ...” The accumulation seems to refer to the area close by Loch Fyne, and does not mention anything about affecting the castle site. However, it is possible that the southern end of Dubh Loch got silted up as well.

MC 56. *“No masonry remains above ground to give any clue as to the appearance of this early castle, though probing has indicated that there is a considerable amount of stonework under the ground.”*

This note by Cock says “For archaeological surveys of the Dubh Loch Castle see Refs. 3, 5 and 8. The description of the Dubh Loch castle here uses similar words to Hugo Millar [9], but Cock does not list Millar.

MC 57. *“Written records are no more helpful in giving a picture of the Dubh Loch Castle. While Pont’s map of circa 1583-95 marks the island, that he calls Ylendow (‘Black Island’), as being occupied, there is no further mention of the site for the next 300 years, until Archibald Campbell’s Records of Argyll (1885).”*



For this sentence, Cock refers us to Refs. 10, 11 and Ref. 7, pp. 36 ff. It is on pages 36-7 that Campbell says: “At the neck of the Dùloch, as it is called, about 150 yards from the Avenue Bridge, are the relics of the MacNaughtain Castle, built on a triangular peninsular; at least, when the loch is at all high, it becomes one, and even in dry weather the old fosse remains to this hour swampy” (Webster’s Dictionary defines “fosse” as a ditch or moat; the latter seems peculiarly apt for a castle, if not a salubrious place for a home). This seems to be the passage that Cock meant when he referred to pp. 44ff above. The Pont map (Fig. 2), which Cock says is reproduced in Ref. 10, can be seen online in Ref. 11.

**Figure 3. Map hand-marked 1899 supplied by the Duke of Argyll and published in *The Red Banner* September 2008.**

The Pont map of Inveraray shows the “Castel of Inreyra” and “Dundarraw” both in the positions we know today for Inveraray Castle and Dunderave. The Notes say “... symbols used by Pont for settlements ... are ... rectangles to the south of Loch Awe and in the west.” Pont shows a settlement at the southern tip of Dubh Loch, just off the western shore, called “Ylendow” (Ylen = island, dow = black) where the modern Inveraray Castle map shows a crannog (Ref. 6).

If you search “Inveraray” on Google Earth (<http://maps.google.co.uk/>), navigate a satellite view northeast, and zoom in, there does appear to be a small round island just off the southwestern shore, with a causeway. This was not apparent when this article was first written in 2007, but the resolution must have increased in 2009. This view, which was still posted in January 2010, may have been taken when the tide was just right to half submerge, half reveal the site and causeway. This is probably the best way to view the site, from space, since it is unobtrusive at ground level on the shoreline.

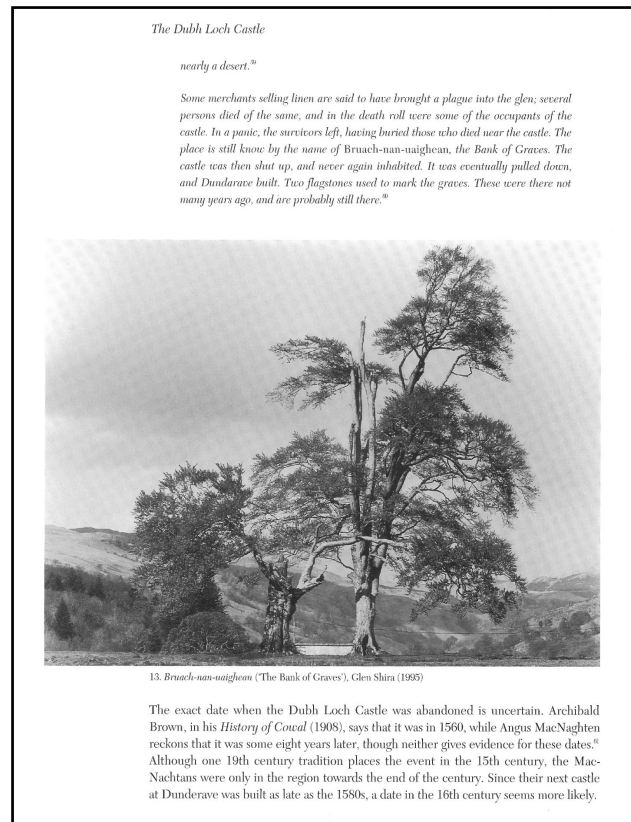
MC 58, 59. *“The Dubh Loch Castle did have a relatively short life, being abandoned after about 100 years of occupation. Various oral traditions ... give little reliable evidence, though they do show the low ebb of the MacNachtan’s fortune ... The MacNaughtons were gradually beaten back, until somewhere in the 15<sup>th</sup> century their representative was a girl of eighteen years of age, with no nearer relation than a second cousin to support her or her claims. She lived in the MacNaughton Castle, on the promontory of the Duloch, Glenshera ... there was an old fortalice of the MacNaughtons, and then the plague came; the girl who was the heiress of the place died of it ...”*

The second part of this is a direct quote from page 69 of Ref. 7. Cock does not say how he calculated the castle was occupied for about 100 years. Pont indicates it was occupied in 1583-95 and Campbell says a girl was there in the 1400s. Cock refers to Ref. 12 page 249, which

indicates 1661 as the year of the plague, when occupation ceased [6], but he does not give a date when the occupation may have started.

MC 60. *“Some merchants selling linen are said to have brought a plague into the glen; several persons died of the same, and in the death roll were some of the occupants of the castle. In a panic, the survivors fled, having buried those who died near the castle. The place is still know [sic] by the name of Bruach-nan-naighean, the Bank of Graves. The castle was then shut up, and never again inhabited. It was eventually pulled down, and Dunderave [sic] built. Two flagstones used to mark the graves. These were there not many years ago, and are probably still there.”*

**Figure 4. Matthew Cock took a photo of these two trees on the southern shore of Dubh Loch for his book [1].**



Cock rightly attributes this portion to Ref 7, page 37, and also refers to MacIntyre [13] about the Bank of Graves, which is discussed elsewhere [2]. MacIntyre says the castle was on the western shore (Fig. 3). Cock took a photo (Fig. 4) in 1998 titled “*Bruach-nan-naighean, the Bank of Graves,*” showing two trees on the southern shore of Dubh Loch, just south of where the Inveraray Castle map shows the MacNaughton castle site. He does not say how he concluded this is the location of the Bank of Graves. It does seem clear the castle was built on a crannog and the burials may have been made on the southern shore. Later, the crannog may have become attached to the shore as a promontory. It would be nice to find the two flagstones; excavations on the bank may turn up something interesting. I have a photo of the same two trees in 2004 (Fig. 5) and one in 2007 (Fig. 6) that shows the larger tree disappeared. The smaller one seemed to be in its last throes or may have disappeared by now.

MC 61. *“The exact date when the Dubh Loch Castle was abandoned is uncertain. Archibald Brown, in his History of Cowal (1908), says that it was in 1560, while Angus MacNaghten reckons that it was some eight years later, though neither gives evidence for these dates. Although one 19th century tradition places the event in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the MacNachtans were only in the region towards the end of the century. Since their next castle at Dunderave was built as late as the 1580s, a date in the 16th century seems more likely.”*

I did not find a book called “History of Cowal,” but Cock was probably referring to Ref. 14, which I have not seen. It seems strange that Cock is not sure about the date of abandonment, which seems very clear in Ref. 12. In my copy of Ref. 15, Angus does not refer to Dubh Loch on page 43 (Cock may have confused this page number with Ref. 14) but says, on page 27: “The inscription over the lintel of Dunderave gives the date 1596 [actually 1598] and it is reasonable to assume that the castle was rebuilt at that date, possibly using the stones from the older building [at Dubh Loch], which had been abandoned for a century or more.” Hence Angus seems to place the abandonment closer to 1496, which is nearer to the date Cock relates from the legend (“somewhere in the 15<sup>th</sup> century”). The Clan was granted the charter for Fraoch Eilean in Loch Awe at the end of the 1200s. I am skeptical about stones moving from Dubh Loch to Dunderave. Many crannog dwellings were made from wood on a stone base. Pont suggests this site was occupied 1583-95, which tends to argue against the abandonment dates favored by Brown, Cock and Macnaghten and supports the date of 1661 [2, 12].



**Figure 5. This photo of the two trees was taken in August 2004 on the Clan Macnachtan Tour.**

*MC 62. Cock speaks of outbreaks of plague in Scotland between 1564 and 1585.*

Cock refers to Ref. 7, page 37, which we have already examined, and Ref. 16 pages 206-210, 255-263, which I reviewed in Ref. 6.

*MC 63. “Before the Gearr Abhainn was widened, the Dubh Loch must have been a breeding ground for disease, for the Records of Argyll states, ‘even in dry weather the old fosse remains to this hour swampy.’”*

For this passage, Cock refers again to Ref. 7, page 37.

## **OTHER REFERENCES**

Cock did not refer to Hugo Millar [9], who wrote in detail about the castle at Dubh Loch in 1964, with impeccable credentials. Millar says “The location of the castle lies east of the river’s exit from the loch, and is on the point of a low, triangular shaped green promontory.” In his Bibliography, Articles, Dissertations and Pamphlets, on page 161, Cock did acknowledge Millar’s article on Fraoch Eilean, published in 1965. Also, Cock does not refer to Duncan McNaughton’s book of 1977 [17], which mentions the Dubh Loch castle, although he does acknowledge Duncan’s 1967 article on John MacNaughton.

Duncan says on page 31, about his Chapter III, The Chiefs and Their Lands on Loch Awe and Loch Fyne: “This chapter is based on the detailed pedigree of the McNaughtons of Dunderawe, the life’s work of Niall, 10<sup>th</sup> Duke of Argyll. The manuscript was made available to Angus Macnaghten and myself by the late Duke, who permitted Angus to make a copy. It is the most

complete record available, including references to documents in other collections which have a bearing on the McNaughton chiefs. It also contains a summary of the now destroyed family papers of the McNaughtons.” The 10<sup>th</sup> Duke died unmarried and childless. It seems the Macnachtan Clan, squeezed out of Argyll by his people, owes the Duke a debt of gratitude. Also, on page 16, Duncan lauds Hugo Millar: “There are several descriptions of the castle of Fraoch Eilean. The best, apart from the *Report for Argyllshire* by the Ancient Monuments Commission, is ‘The Castle of Fraoch Eilean, Loch Awe, Argyll’ by Hugo Millar, in the *Transactions of the Glasgow Archaeological Society*, New Series, Part III, pp. 111-128. An earlier description appeared in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* of 1912, giving the Fraoch legend.” *Report for Argyllshire* by the Ancient Monuments Commission is now absorbed by the RCAHMS. In Ref. 9, Millar quote two references also used by Cock [7, 14] and two others [18, 19].



Figure 6. The sole remaining tree in June 2007.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF DUBH LOCH

Examination of the above references suggests the following as the most likely history of Dubh Loch in regard to the Macnachtan castle. The Macnachtans built a fort or castle on a small island, or crannog, surrounded by water, or at least marshy ground, in the southern end of Dubh Loch. This was a good defensive position, since adversaries could be observed coming from any direction and would have to approach slowly by boat. However, it was not so good for one’s health, especially for an 18-year-old heiress, who these days would be more likely found at clubs in Los Angeles and New York. When the inhabitants were devastated by the Black Plague, the dead were buried at the nearest point on the southern shore at the Bank of Graves. There may have been no room on the island for burials and not much incentive or energy to bury further away. There was a freak flood that caused the southern end to silt up and the crannog became a mound on the shoreline. One or two large old trees overlooked the Bank of Graves for many years. Millar [9] said the site was east of the river’s exit (Fig. 7), but it seems more likely to have been on the west coast. A chronology of references to the Dubh Loch castle is shown in the table.

## REFERENCES

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4. RCAHMS Website <http://www.rcahms.gov.uk/>
5. RCAHMS record card NN11 SW5  
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6. McNaughton, Ken, "Dubh Loch Castle; Archeology and Plague"  
[http://clanmacnaughton.net/docs\\_articles/Dubh Loch Castle Part2.pdf](http://clanmacnaughton.net/docs_articles/Dubh_Loch_Castle_Part2.pdf)
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13. MacIntyre, Peter, "Inveraray: Its Scenery and Associations," 1909, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, McQuorkodale & Co., Ltd., Caxton Works, Glasgow, 1923.
14. Brown, Archibald, "Memorials of Argyleshire: In Five Parts" (History of Cowal, p. 43?).
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16. Shrewsbury, J. F. D., "A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles," Cambridge, 1970, 206-210, 255-263.
17. McNaughton, Duncan, "The Clan McNaughton: A History," Albyn Press, Edinburgh, 1977.
18. "Origines Parochiales Scotiae: The Antiquities Ecclesiastical and Territorial of the Parishes of Scotland," two volumes in three, published by W. H. Lizars for The Bannatyne Club, 1854, 1851 and 1855 respectively, Edinburgh.
19. *The Highland Papers*, Vol. 1, available at The Scottish History Society.



**Figure 7. If you stand at the southern tip of Dubh Loch there seems to be a small crannog on the eastern shore, center right in the photo.**

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CHRONOLOGY OF REFERENCES TO THE MACNACHTAN CASTLE AT DUBH LOCH	
DATE	ITEM
1267	Macnachtan Clan granted charter for Fraoch Eilean in Loch Awe
End of 14 <sup>th</sup> century	Macnachtans arrived in Glen Shira, according to Campbell [7]
Somewhere in the 15 <sup>th</sup> century	Campbell [7] says the Macnachtans' representative was an 18-year-old girl who lived in the Dubh Loch castle and died of the plague.
1560	Cock [1] says that Archibald Brown [14] wrote this was the year the castle was abandoned.
1568	Cock [1] says Angus Macnaghten wrote this was the year the castle was abandoned.
1583-1595	Pont hand draws a map of Dubh Loch, showing a "settlement" at the southern end, just off the western shore, which he calls Ylen dow, or black island [11].
1596-8	Dunderave was built.
1661	The Marquess of Lorne [12] says plague hit Dubh Loch castle, which was abandoned.
Mid or late 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Campbell [7] says there was a remarkable waterspout in the glen and the area around the loch (Dubh) became less marshy.
1803	MacIntyre [13] says part of the castle walls were still standing.
1843	First recorded mention of MacNaughton castle beside Dubh Loch [3].
1885	Archibald Campbell publishes a book [7] with numerous references to the castle.
1898	Marquess of Lorne suggests castle abandoned in 1661 [12].
1899	Handwritten date on map of Dubh Loch castle published in <i>The Red Banner</i> in September 2008.
1909	MacIntyre [13] says the castle is on the western shore.
1943	First Canadian Corps trained for assault landings at Dubh Loch under command of General Andrew George Latta McNaughton and may have made excavations on site of castle [6].
1963	Campbell and Sandeman publish an archeological survey [8] summarizing earlier work and saying castle is on SW of loch.
1964	Hugo Millar publishes an article [9] about all three Macnachtan castles and says the castle is east of the river's exit from Dubh Loch.
1984	A pencil plan of the site is registered with the RCAHMS [5] that is compatible with a SW location.
1998	Mathew Cock [1] writes a chapter about the castle but does not include a photo, plan or description of the location.
March 2008	"Location of Macnachtan Settlements on Dubh Loch" published in <i>The Red Banner</i> and a memorial is proposed [2].
September 2008	<i>The Red Banner</i> publishes a letter from the Duke of Argyll and a map hand marked 1899, showing the castle on the southwestern shore.
June 2009	Chairman announces in <i>The Red Banner</i> that the memorial project has been suspended indefinitely.
2009	Google satellite map resolution improves enough to show a small round island off the southwestern shore of Dubh Loch, with a causeway.