

# KING ALEXANDER III AND THE MACNACHTAN CHARTER

The Picts ruled northeastern Scotland from 448-843 A.D. but left little written evidence apart from a list of kings. Several were called Nechtan, including Nechtan mac Der-Ilei (son of the matriarch Derile), who ruled from 706-724, became a monk, fought for the Pictish throne and reigned again until 732. His family, followers and descendants supposedly became the Macnachtans. The first written evidence of the Macnachtan Clan is a charter dated 12 February 1267 from King Alexander III to Gillecrist Macnachdan and his heirs for the keeping of his castle and island of Frechelan in Loch Awe (Fig. 1). Why did King Alexander turn over this castle to the Macnachtans?



**Figure 1. The castle on Fraoch Eileen.**

The Scottish monarchy is generally dated from Kenneth MacAlpin, a Scot from Northern Ireland who married a Pictish princess, united disparate tribes and ruled from 843 to 848. Alexander II (1198-1249) became King of Scots in 1214. He strengthened the reconciliation with England when in 1221 he married the sister of Henry III, Joan of England. The next year marked the subjection of the hitherto semi-independent district of Argyll by Royal forces. In 1237 the Treaty of York defined the boundary between the two kingdoms as running between the Solway Firth in the west and the River Tweed in the east. Joan died in 1238 and Alexander remarried in 1239 to Marie de Coucy (Coucy is north of Paris). Their son, the future Alexander III, was born in 1241.

Alexander II turned his attention to securing the Western Isles, which had been Norwegian territories for centuries (Norse control was formalized in 1098). Alexander attempted to persuade Ewen, son of Duncan, Lord of Argyll, to sever his allegiance to Haakon IV of Norway. When Ewen rejected these attempts, Alexander sailed forth to compel him. But on the way Alexander suffered a fever and died in 1249 at the Isle of Kerrera in the Inner Hebrides just offshore from Oban, whereupon Alexander III, aged eight, succeeded him as King of Scots.



**Figure 2. The view from Fraoch Eileen up the Brander Pass toward the Firth of Lorn and the Atlantic Ocean.**

During Alexander's years of minority there was an embittered struggle for control of affairs. At the age of ten, he married Margaret of England, daughter of Henry III and Eleanor of Provence, who was his own age. When he turned 21 in 1262 Alexander declared his intention of resuming the projects in the Western Isles that had been cut short by the death of his father thirteen years earlier. He laid a formal claim before King Haakon, who rejected the claim and in 1263 responded with a formidable invasion force. Haakon halted off the Isle of Arran, southwest of Glasgow in the Firth of Clyde, and negotiations commenced.

Alexander artfully prolonged the talks until the autumn storms and, when Haakon finally attacked, he found his position hopeless, retreated and died in Orkney in December. At this point, medieval Norway had reached the peak of its power. The Western Isles now lay at Alexander's feet. In 1266 Haakon's successor Magnus the Law-Mender concluded the Treaty of Perth and ceded to Scotland all her island possessions including the Isle of Man and the Hebrides but excluding Shetland and Orkney in return for a monetary consideration.



**Figure 3. Two sides of King Alexander III's seal show him seated at his inauguration in Scone Abbey on 13 July 1249 (left) and mounted on horseback, both inscribed "ALEXANDER DEO REGGORE REX SCOTTORUM."**

So at the tender age of twenty five Alexander must have been feeling pretty pleased with himself and grateful to those who helped him in this monumental achievement. In February of the next year at Scone he turned over the castle and island of Frechelan to the Macnachtans. The castle in Loch Awe commands a good view up the Brander Pass toward the Firth of Lorn and the Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 2), as well as being within sight of the castle at the head of the loch. This was a strategic post in Argyll in the event of another seaborne invasion.

### THE CHARTER

Remarkably, the charter has survived. It is one of the oldest documents in the National Archives of Scotland (the oldest is the 1127 charter of King David I to St. Cuthbert's Church for all the land below Edinburgh Castle). The seal of Alexander III has been lost but we know what it looked like and a facsimile is available. The original charter is coded RH6/55 and is in the published index "Handlist of the Acts of Alexander III Guardians and John," compiled by Grant G. Simpson, 1960, *Regesta Regum Scottorum*, Edinburgh, as No. 62. The facsimile, with seal, is coded GD112/16/7/2/34. Both records may be viewed as digital copies in the Historical Search Room of General Register House, with no advance notice required. Visitors will, however, need to obtain a reader's ticket for the National Archives of Scotland, and details of this may be found on the NAS website at <http://www.nas.gov.uk/searchRooms/preparing.asp>. Copies of both may be purchased in person, or by contacting NAS via [enquiries@nas.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@nas.gov.uk).

Angus Macnaghten [1] writes about the last Scottish Chief of Clan Macnachtan [2] and says on page 2: "In 1753 John McNachtane attached a Latin memorandum to a facsimile of a charter, given to his ancestor, Gillechrist in 1267 by King Alexander III of Scotland. It reads as follows: *Excudi fecit Johannes M'Naughtan regionum vectigalium apud Anstruther exactor, a predicto Gillecris perpetua masculorum serie oriundus A.D.1753.* Translated, this reads: John M'Naughtan, Customs Officer at Anstruther, descended in an unbroken male line from the aforesaid Gillecris had this copy printed A.D. 1753."

On page 54 Angus says: "At the beginning of this book I mentioned the copy of the famous Charter, which John commissioned to be made. It was an empty gesture, as he had no male heirs, but we can accept it as evidence that John did not consider himself as a mere customs official, and that he liked to recall that he had seven hundred years of recorded ancestry behind him. How did he obtain the original to have it copied? All his ancestral papers and deeds had passed, with the family lands, to the Campbells of Ardkinglas. The original charter is now in the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh, and a copy of the facsimile is in the National Library of Scotland ..."

“It is a most handsome document, with the superscription explaining its nature, followed by an exact replica of the original charter, below which are life-size impressions of the royal seal, both front and reverse. Then follows the Latin inscription, quoted in the first chapter, and, in small writing, ‘Rich’d Cooper sculp.’ Richard Cooper was a well-known engraver, who settled in Edinburgh, where he died in 1764. Finally, the charter is again reproduced, this time in an elegant 18th century script.”

In 2008 I corresponded with various officers of the National Archives of Scotland about the Charter. On 26 May I received an email from Ms. Alison Lindsay, Head of the Historical Search Section, in which she said:

“GD112/16/7/2/34 is a facsimile of RH6/55. It is on a single sheet of paper, measuring approximately some 38.5 cm high, by 23.5 cm. There is no watermark on the paper but it has the narrow laid lines of good-quality paper. From the size and quality of the paper, I would guess it dates to the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The facsimile occupies the upper two thirds of the paper, in a portrait format. The facsimile consists of the charter and large images of the seal of Alexander III, recto and verso (right side and reverse). It is an engraving on a single metal plate, as can be seen from the shallowly indented rectangular border which runs round the text and seals.

It is headed, as part of the engraving, “Charta, Alexandri III Regis” and on the line below, “Gillecris Mac-Nachdan concessa, Anno Dom MCCLXVII (1767).” Neither of these two lines appears on the original charter. Below that is a copy of the text as it appears on the charter, i.e., as close to a photograph as an earlier century could manage without that technology. Below that are the two seal images and below that the text “Excudi fecit Johannes McNaughtan regiorum vectigalium apud Anstruther Exactor a praedicto Gillecris perpetua masculorum serie oriundus AD1753.” In very small script is “Richd Cooper Sculp.”, which is the name of the engraver. This is the end of the engraved section.

Below that some person has written a transcription of the text (he has copied out the original Latin) on ruled pencil lines in ink that has now turned brown. This fills the remainder of the page. There is no marking of any kind on the back. I have no idea whether the seal would still have been attached when the engraving was made, or how accurate this engraving is as a copy of it. The seal of Alexander III, like the seals of almost all Scottish kings, is known from the copies that do survive, attached and loose. As time has usually wrought some damage to these, it is customary to make an image of a seal based on several known images, which allows a composite to be created.”

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## REFERENCES

1. Macnaghten, Angus, “In Search of Two Kinsmen,” Volturna Press, 1979.
2. McNaughton, Ken, “The Last Scottish Chief of Clan Macnaghtan”  
[http://www.clanmacnaughton.net/docs\\_articles/THE\\_LAST\\_SCOTTISH\\_CHIEF\\_OF\\_CLAN\\_MACNAGHTAN-4.pdf](http://www.clanmacnaughton.net/docs_articles/THE_LAST_SCOTTISH_CHIEF_OF_CLAN_MACNAGHTAN-4.pdf)
3. Mackie, J. D., “A History of Scotland,” Penguin Books, 1991.
4. Wikipedia proved most useful for an overview of Alexander II, Alexander III and Haakon IV.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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