

Clan Leslie Society INTERNATIONAL



Brief History of Clan Leslie

Perhaps no other great Scottish family has an origin as romantic as that of the Leslies. In 1067 a storm drove a ship bound for France to seek anchorage in the calmer waters of the Firth of Forth. The noble passengers had fled England as their future with William the Conqueror, the victor of the Battle of Hastings, was insecure. This group was led by Edgar Atheling, descendant of King Alfred of England. Along were his mother, an Hungarian princess, and his sister Margaret. They were given refuge by Malcolm III, Caenmore, King of Scotland at his castle at Dunfermline. Malcolm will be remembered from Shakespeare as having defeated MacBeth, and regained the Scottish throne from him. He fell in love with the beautiful and talented Princess Margaret and married her. The queen became Saint Margaret of Scotland.

There was a second romance. Margaret's chamberlain, an Hungarian noble, Bartholomew (called Bardolf at the Saxon English Court) was extremely capable and physically powerful. He greatly impressed the King, who made him Commander of Edinburgh Castle. Bartholomew fell in love with the King's sister, Beatrix, and with royal consent, were married. Family tradition is that King Malcolm then promised Bartholomew, in hereditary right, all the land within a mile of where his horse gave out after riding North from Dunfermline. The horse tired out in a spot in Garioch, a beautiful, fertile rolling hill land northwest of Aberdeen. After he returned to court, Bartholomew told King Malcolm that "between a less ley and a mair, my horse tyred and stopped there." To which King Malcolm responded, "Lord Lesley shalt thou be, and thy heirs after thee." Beyond doubt, Bartholomew did obtain from Malcolm III, a grant in lands of Lesselyn in the Garioch. The Parish of Leslie, not far from Aberdeen, thus became the first family seat, and it is from here that Clan Leslie obtained its name and spread. Bartholomew lived to a great age, perhaps into his 80s and died in 1121. The present Leslie Castle, in ruins until a few years ago, was built in the 17th century on the banks of the Gaudy Burn (creek), the site of the original stronghold.

Bartholomew was succeeded by his son Malcolm, knighted for bravery in battle by King William the Lion. A charter confirming the Leslie lands, around 1175, is the oldest personal land charter in Aberdeenshire. Malcolm became constable (commander) of the castle at Invurie, died in 1176 and was succeeded by his son, Norman. Next was Norino and again the Leslie lands were confirmed, this time by King Alexander II. Sir Norman de Leslie, one of the magnates of Scotland, sat in the parliament called by King Robert the Bruce, followed Norino. Andrew succeeded Sir Norman and in 1320 appears in the list of the greater barons of Scotland who signed the Declaration of Arbroath, the first statement of nationalism in European history and a call for freedom, the likes of which were not to be heard again until the American Declaration of Independence, 456 years later.

Andrew had four sons, the oldest, Andrew succeeded him. His second son, Walter, became the Earl of Ross. The third son, John, headed up a branch that would become the Earls of Rothes. The fourth son, George, became the first Baron of Balquhain. The eldest, Andrew, was succeeded by his grandson, David, who fought in the Crusades. David had one daughter who married a distant cousin, Alexander of Balquhain. This line became extinct with the death of George, eight Baron, in 1646.

The Leslie-Ross line was short but complicated. Walter, a second son of Andrew, married Eufemia, a Countess of Ross, and became Earl when Eufemia's father died. Walter and Eufemia had Alexander, who succeeded as Earl, and married Isabel Stewart, daughter of Robert, Duke of Albany and they had an only daughter, Eufemia, who resigned her rights as Countess and entered a convent. Walter and his wife Eufemia also had a daughter, Margaret, who married Donald, Lord of the Isles. Donald, through his wife Margaret, claimed the vacant Earldom of Ross, but his claim was opposed by the Duke of Albany. This dispute resulted in the famous Battle of Harlaw (1411) when Donald attempted to confirm his claim by force of arms.

The third line, which became the senior one, furnished the Earls of Rothes with Lord George, great-grandson of John who became first Earl around 1457. This line has continued to the present. It includes William, third Earl, who fell at Flodden in 1513, along with King James IV and much of the Scottish nobility. George, fourth Earl, played a big role in Scottish history as one of the Commissioners who contracted the marriage of Queen Mary of Scots to Francis Dauphin of France. He was married five times, had 14 legitimate children and two acknowledged "natural" children. (It must be recognized that without "natural" offspring, many great Scottish families would not have survived, including several Leslie branches). John, seventh Earl, was raised to Duke by Charles II but the title reverted to an Earldom when he produced no male heir. Ian Lionel Malcolm Leslie is the 21st Earl and present Chief of Clan Leslie. Ten branches developed from the Rothes line, including Lindores and Newark, but all except one, in Ireland, became extinct.

The fourth line, the Leslies of Balquhain, became the largest and most prolific. Except for those who are a direct part of the Rothes, almost all Leslies today are descended from the first Baron of Balquhain, George, who obtained title in 1340, and in particular via the third Baron, Andrew. He had only two legitimate sons in addition to many others. Andrew commanded the cavalry of the Earl of Mar's army which defeated Donald, Lord of the Isles, at Harlaw in Leslie country in 1411. Six of Andrew's sons fell at that battle. They are commemorated in a poem: "Six of the bravest Leslies pressed the plain, while round these warriors lay whole heaps of slain." He, himself, was killed by the Sheriff of Angus in consequence of a feud. From him descended John Leslie, Bishop of Ross, Queen Mary's trusted advisor; the Earls of Leven, Leslies of Kinivry, Pitcaple, Iden, and Cults; Counts Leslie in Germany, Lords Leslies in Russia, the Leslies of Ireland (Kincraigie, Glasslough, Tarbert, and others) and the Counts Leslies in France. The 21st Baron of Balquhain took active part in the Stuart cause both in 1715 and in 1745, as did his son the 22nd Baron. The castle at Auchinhove was burned by the English after Culloden. Only one of the Leslie Castles or stately homes remain in the family. Pitcaple Castle went into another family by marriage, and Fetternear, the Balquhain home, was sold in the 1930s. The still imposing ruins of Leslie castles remain at Rothes, Ballinbreich, and Balquhain. The castle at Leslie has recently been rebuilt by Baron David Leslie.

Almost unique among the clans, the Leslies had branches abroad which throughout centuries remained bound to the family in Scotland. The first was founded in France by Philip, of the Leslies of Bucharn and Wardis, progenitor of the Leslies, Lords of Clisson and Counts of Vergenne. He went to France around 1600. This branch produced soldiers and statesman; a few of who survived the French Revolution and went to Scotland. The second and longest lasting branch abroad was founded by General Sir Alexander of Auchintoul, who went to Russia in 1632 and became the first Lord Leslie several years later. This became a large branch and prospered until the Russian Revolution. Most of the family was exterminated in 1918. Descendants of a few survivors are in the United States. There also was a sub-branch founded by a French Leslie, with only one survivor of the Bolshevik reign of terror, now living in Portugal. The Leslies in Russia were primarily soldiers and landowners. A third branch, the Austrian one, was founded by Walter of the Balquhain Leslies in 1640 when he settled in Vienna while in the Austrian service. He became Count of the Austrian Empire, a Field Marshall and Ambassador.

VISIT OUR WEB SITE AT: www.clanlesliesociety.org