The Early Stewart Kings, the Lordship of the Isles, and Ireland, c.1371-c.1433[1]

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THE IRISH ANNALS record that in the summer of 1433, a large MacDonald war fleet descended upon the eastern coast of Ulster.[2] Though the precise location is uncertain, it appears that this force landed somewhere in the modern-day barony of Dufferin; then a lordship situated on the east coast of County Down and controlled by the Anglo-Irish White family. Upon arrival the commander of the Scottish fleet, whom numerous annals refer to simply as 'MacDomhnaill na h-Alban'(i.e., MacDonald of Scotland), was received by Eoghan O'Neill, the lord of Tyrone. These leaders appear to have entered into some form of council with one another before agreeing to combine their armed forces and embark upon what eventually amounted to an impressive military campaign against Eoghan's main rival, Niall Garbh O'Donnell (d.1439), the lord of Tyrconnell. Moreover, the success of this joint military venture had a major impact not only upon the politics of Ulster, where it saw Eoghan established as the dominant magnate, it had serious ramifications for the balance of power within Scotland and the fortunes of the MacDonalds.

The significance of the MacDonald intervention in Ulster has received very little attention within the historiography of late medieval Ireland and Scotland.[3] Broadly speaking historians have tended to view medieval Gaelic Ireland and Gaelic Scotland as separate cultural and political spheres, rather than exploring how both regions were highly interconnected through ties of dynastic politics and common political and military interest.[4] Instead scholars

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1   I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for their constructive comments which improved this essay significantly.
2   *AU* 1433 (all annals references are gives as the year rather than the volume or page number); *AFM* 1433.
3   The presence of the war fleet has received passing mention in Simms 1997, 16-17; Kingston 2004, 90-2; O'Byrne 2009.
4   Ellis 1999. 449-69; MacGregor 2000, 77-97; McLeod 2004.

have come to regard the Bruce invasions of the early 14th century as the 'high point' in Hiberno-Scottish relations during the Middle Ages.[5] Furthermore, prior to the Plantations of Ulster in the early 17th century, historians have generally considered Hiberno-Scottish interaction to have extended little beyond the irregular galloglass and redshank mercenary trade.[6] A number of historians have thus come to see the MacDonald intervention of 1433 as little more than a force of mercenaries operating under the auspices of Eoghan O'Neill.[7] A larger body of contemporary evidence however, not only challenges this assumption, it also suggests that the fleet's commander 'MacDomhnaill na h-Alban' was none other than Alexander (d.1449), Lord of the Isles and clan chief of the wider MacDonald dynasty. The Lord of the Isles was on campaign in Ireland for a very important purpose.

A short essay such as this is not the place for a detailed reassessment of the politics underpinning the interconnectivity of the Hiberno-Scottish world in the later Middle Ages. The case study of 1433 is useful nonetheless, as it offers the potential for exploring how developments in Ireland often impacted upon affairs in Scotland. Drawing upon a broad base of primary material from Ireland, Scotland, and England, this essay provides an overview of the developing relationship between the Gaelic Irish of Ulster, the MacDonalds, and the Stewart monarchy from the late 14th century down to the 1430s.

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5   For studies of the Bruce invasions, see Nicholson 1963, 30-40; Idem 1978, chapter 5; Philips 1979, 247-70; O Murchadha 1982-83, 61-7; Duncan 1988, 100-17; McNamee 1997, chapter 5; Duffy 1998, 59-121; Idem 2002; Brown 2008, chapter 7; Penman 2014a, chapters 6-7.

6   The term galloglass derives from the Irish *gall óglach* meaning 'foreign soldier'. Galloglass were professional soldiers who fought for Irish lords from the thirteenth century onwards. They originally hailed from the western highlands of Scotland with many seeking employment in Ireland having lost their lands and status in Scotland – the MacSweenys of Knapdale being perhaps the most famous example. Over time the galloglass became a permanent feature of Irish warfare, forming the backbone of most Irish armies. In return they received lands within their employer's lordship thus providing the host kindred with a hereditary supply of soldiers. It is generally accepted that the galloglass migrations cease in the early fifteenth century when the movement of troops from Scotland switched to a form of seasonal recruitment. These seasonal warriors became known as 'redshanks' and played a prominent role in delaying the Tudor conquest of Ireland. For mercenary trade, Hayes-McCoy 1937; McKerral 1951, 1-14; Lydon 1992, 1-15; McKerral 1981, 5-15; Simms 1996, 110-115; Nicholls 2003, 99-104; McLeod 2007,144-167; Nicholls 2007, 85-105; Simms 2007, 106-23. For a reassessment of the Plantation period, see essays in Edwards and Egan 2015.

7   For example, see O'Byrne 2009. A number of other historians have also confused similar Scottish interventions in Ulster with galloglass activity. An example is the earl of Orkney's attack on Ulster in 1401 which Simon Kingston (2004, 47) misinterpreted as the work of the MacDonalds of Antrim. Alastair MacDonald has also confused the MacDonald settlement of Antrim with galloglass activity, see MacDonald 2000, 32. For the main authority on the galloglass settlement and associated pitfalls of identification, see Nicholls 1991, 11-24; Idem 2007, 85-105.

The rise of the Clan Donald

Under the leadership of John MacDonald (d.1387), the first Lord of the Isles, the MacDonald lordship emerged as a potent force within the Irish Sea world. The collapse of effective royal power in northern Scotland and eastern Ulster during the Anglo-Scottish wars of the early 14th century created a vacuum which John readily exploited.[8] By the 1350s John had not only secured control of the Hebrides, he had made significant territorial gains in northern Scotland, particularly in the lordship of Lochaber.[9] Further west, a series of dynastic alliances with the O'Cahans of the Ciannachta and O'Neills of Clandeboy bought him regional allies in Ulster who could guard against dynastic threats deriving from Ireland.[10] This ongoing territorial aggrandisement of the island lordship and John's ability to raise considerable military and maritime resources made him a valuable ally of the English crown.

Following the outbreak of the Hundred Years War, John moved between English and Scottish allegiance to further his strategic goals.[11] Much of this centred on solidifying his hold on north-western Scotland, and from the early 1340s down to the early 1370s, John tightened his grip on large sections of Scotland's north-western seaboard.[12] The death of the childless David II in 1371 and the ascension of his nephew, Robert Stewart (d.1390), as Robert II saw John briefly reconciled to the Scottish crown. Prior to becoming king, Robert had established himself as the most powerful magnate within Scotland and created a vast web of dynastic alliances spanning the kingdom.[13] An acculturated magnate originally hailing from western Scotland, Stewart was able to move easily across the Gaelic and Scots-English speaking divide and enjoyed strong relations with many Gaelic Scottish kindreds such as the Campbells of Loch Awe and the Clan Donnchaidh of Atholl.[14]

Initially John had good reason to be hopeful about the opportunities raised by Robert's succession. John had married Robert's daughter, Margaret,

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8   For collapse of royal power in western and northern in Scotland, see *ALI* xxx-xxxv, 4; Boardman 1996, 1-30; Idem 1997, 7.
9   For accounts of John's rise to power see *ALI* 1-12, 286-93; McDonald 1998, 187-9; Murray, 2002, 221-230; Penman 2014b, 71-86.
10 It has been suggested that John exiled his cousins, the Clan Alexander, to Ireland in the early 1330s where they found shelter and employment with the O'Neills of Tyrone. Fearing an O'Neill-backed coup in the Isles, John orchestrated a series of regional alliances amongst the O'Neills' regional rivals - see Murray 2002, 221-230.
11 For example, see *Rotuli Scotiae* i, 516, 534-5; *ALI*, 1-4; *CDS* iii, no. 1272; The National Archives of the United Kingdom E 101/315/23, 'Particulars of the account of Robert de Assheton of journeys to Ireland, the Isles and Lombardy', 25 January 1367.
12 For more on the MacDonald expansion into Lochaber, see *Highland Papers* i, 25.
13 For the rise of the Stewart dynasty, see Boardman 1997, chapters 1-2.
14 Boardman 2006, 83-109.

in 1350 and the lord of the Isles, despite an uneasy relationship with David II, appears to have maintained a cordial relationship with his father-in-law.[15] As Alexander Grant has noted, John may have hoped to receive some form of royal lieutenancy in western Scotland from the new king.[16] This, however, proved unforthcoming and John gradually drifted back into English allegiance. The early 1370s witnessed the renewal of the Hundred Years War and the beginning of the Franco-Scottish military ascendancy.[17] The dwindling Anglo-Irish earldom of Ulster was thus vulnerable to Scottish attack.[18] The government of Richard II, in turn, sought to utilise the lordship of the Isles' resources to protect the earldom. Allowing for a greater degree of MacDonald influence in Ulster was central to this strategy.

Prior to his death in 1387, John secured a marriage for his daughter, Christina, to Robert Savage of the Ards Peninsula in modern-day County Down.[19] The precise identity of Robert is uncertain but he appears to have been the son of Robert (d.1360), the previous crown seneschal of Ulster, and the brother of Edmund (fl. 1385-98), the seneschal at that time.[20] The Savage family had, for much of the 14th century, helped protect the earldom of Ulster from the encroaching Magennis, O'Hanlon and O'Neill kindreds.[21] Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the Savages were an acculturated kindred which would help contextualise their cordial and dynastic relations with successive lords of the Isles.[22] Under John's successor, Donald (d.1423), the lordship further increased its influence in Ireland. During the early 1390s, Donald's brother, John Mór (d.1428), acquired possession of the Glynns of Antrim by virtue of his marriage to the heiress, Marjory Bisset. This match

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15   *ALI*, 242. During the 1350s and 1360s David II tried to weaken Stewart and MacDonald influence in western Scotland by promoting a royal favourite in the lordship of Lorn - see Boardman 2000, 219-47.

16   Grant 1998, 126-7.

17   For an overview of the wider conflict see Sumption 2009.

18   As evident from the Otterburn campaign of 1388, see *Orygynale Cronykil* iii, 32-4. The Anglo-Irish colony in Ulster and Leinster had been subjected to numerous Scottish assaults during the late fourteenth century, see *RCH*, 127/243 20 March 1386. The threat posed to English possessions in the Irish Sea resulted in the bolstering of coastal defences in Wales in May 1385, *CCR 1381-5*, 549, and the Anglo-Scottish marches in June, *CCR 1381-5*, 637. In the summer of 1388 the English council feared that Cork city, having suffered numerous attacks from the Gaelic Irish and 'king's enemies' would be lost (to whom is not specified) if not reinforced during the renewed period of war with Scotland and France, *CCR 1381-5*, 521-2.

19   *RCH* 137/218. The marriage was then ratified by the English council at Westminster, see *CPR 1385-9*, 435. Following the ratification of the marriage between Christina and Robert Savage, the council dispatched John, bishop of Sodor, to negotiate an alliance with Donald and his half-brother, Godfrey of Uist, in July, see *Rotuli Scotiae* ii, 94-95; *Foedera* ii, 592.

20   Simms 2009, 157.

21   Frame 1998a, 196; Idem 1998b, 279-300.

22   For instance, Jenkin Savage, possibly a brother of the previous crown seneschal, Sir Robert Savage (d.1360), was praised as a patron of Gaelic bards - see *AU*, 1374.

was orchestrated by Robert's brother, Edmund, who had previously been granted wardship of Marjory by Richard II in 1389.[23]

The establishment of John Mór's lordship in Antrim strengthened the MacDonalds' position within Scotland. By the mid-1390s Donald's brother, Alexander of Lochaber, had overrun much of the Great Glen and posed a threat to settlements on the Moray coastal plain.[24] It is from within this context that the Stewart monarchy looked westwards to Gaelic Ireland for support against the MacDonalds. Relations between the Scottish crown and the O'Donnells of Tyrconnell can be traced to the early 1380s.[25] Over the course of the late 14th century the O'Donnells gradually established themselves as a potent force in Irish politics.[26] The strategic location of the lordship of Tyrconnell on the north-western coast of Ireland, coupled with the ability of successive O'Donnell chieftains to raise large armies, made them ideal allies against the MacDonalds.[27] Moreover, thanks to the leadership of Turlough an Fhíona O'Donnell (d.1425), the O'Donnells had, by the late 14th century, come to challenge the O'Neills of Tyrone for supremacy within Ulster.

During his tenure as chieftain (1380-1422), Turlough an Fhíona created a broad web of alliances that stretched across much of the north-western half of Ireland. [28] Powerful dynasties such as the O'Connor Ruadh kindred in Roscommon, the MacWilliam Burkes of Mayo, and the O'Connors of Offaly were bound to O'Donnell through ties of kinship, marriage and fosterage.[29] O'Donnell overlordship was also imposed over lesser kindreds, such as the MacDermots of Moylurg and the O'Hanlons of eastern Ulster, through military intimidation and hostage taking. Ultimately, this aristocratic network formed the basis for O'Donnell military power. The military muscle of the O'Donnells was attractive to the Scottish crown and could not only be used against the MacDonalds in Antrim; the O'Donnells could be brought to bear

23   A precise date for the marriage is uncertain but it most likely took place in the early 1390s - see RCH 146/198 14 October 1389.
24   Sinclair 1889, 276-80; Steer and Bannerman 1977, 129-31; ALI 14-15, 197; Boardman 1992, 8. By April 1398 Urquhart castle had been lost to the Clan Donald - see RPS, 1398/18 c.28 April 1398.
25   During the 1380s, petitions form Tyrconnell were being sent to Avignon via Robert II of Scotland - see CEPR 1896, 559, 575-576.
26   Simms 1995, 183-202; Egan 2017.
27   As well as a small fleet of galleys - see Egan Forthcoming.
28   For an overview of his career, see Simms 1977, 7-12.
29   The development of Turlough an Fhíona's alliance network can be traced through the large body of annalistic material. The Annals of the Four Masters are particularly detailed on the development of the Tyrconnell lordship while the Annals of Ulster, the Annals of Connacht, and the Annals of Loch Cé demonstrate how O'Donnell power and influence extended beyond Ulster - see AU, 1380-1422; ALC, 1380-1422; AC, 1380-1422; AFM, 1380-1422.

upon the Anglo-Irish colony in Ulster and northern Leinster. This became particularly important during the early 15th century. Prior to 1414, the French, due to internal political strife, were reluctant to renew the Hundred Years War with England, thus leaving Scotland dangerously exposed to English aggression.

The governments of Robert III (d.1406) and his brother, Robert duke of Albany (d.1420), were nonetheless able to contain both Henry VI (d.1413) and Henry V (d.1422) by opening a series of fronts within the wider British Isles. The period 1400-1423 witnessed a dramatic rise in Scottish naval operations in the Irish Sea.[30] While some of this activity does appear to have been directed toward Wales, most of it centred on attacking English holdings in eastern Ulster and northern Leinster. Moreover, many of these Scottish 'rovers' were often supported by O'Donnells' local allies in eastern Ulster: the Magennis and O'Hanlons.[31] More striking perhaps is the fact that by the early 1420s, the English government in Dublin had become acutely concerned that O'Donnell had allied with the Scots to 'burn and destroy the land [i.e., Ireland]'.[32]

The battle for the north

Scottish political manipulation of the Gaelic world gradually forced the English monarchy into closer negotiations with certain Gaelic factions. Richard II had attempted to create an Anglophile Gaelic 'bloc' in Ireland during the 1390s.[33] Political tensions in England (resulting in Richard's eventual deposition) and the unwillingness of the Anglo-Irish administration to work with Richard's newfound Gaelic Irish allies, saw the scheme collapse. Richard had more success with the MacDonalds and was instrumental in securing their permanent settlement in Antrim.[34] The Lancastrian administration of Henry

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30 For examples of such, see *Ancient Irish Histories* ii, 17, 19; *PPC* i, 153; *CPR 1405-9*, 88, 114, 145; *CDS* iv, 147, No.714; *Adam of Usk*, 131; *MIA* 1947, 1404; *AFM*, 1412; *RCH* 170/74, 178/77, 221/111, 233/15; The National Archives of the United Kingdom E 28/15/67, 'Petition from Thomas Walton, Merchant of Drogheda', 12 November 1404; E 28/15/86, 'Copy of letter from Henry IV to Prince James of Scotland', 24 November 1404; E 28/43/52, 'Draft letter from Henry VI to Edmund Mortimer, earl of March', early January 1424.

31 On the following occasions, *Ancient Irish Histories* ii, 17, 19; *MIA*, 1404; *AFM*, 1412, 1418; The National Archives of the United Kingdom E 28/43/52, 'Draft letter from Henry VI to Edmund Mortimer, earl of March', early January 1424.

32 *RCH* 233/15.

33 For an overview of Richard II's Irish expeditions, see Curtis 1978, 274-5; Johnston 1980, 1-20; Idem 1981, 175-95; Frame 1990, 213-17; Otway-Ruthven 1993, 324-38; Lydon 1995, 281-94; Duffy 1997, 159-66; Smith 2013, 82-6. For a recent reassessment of Richard II's Irish expeditions, see Egan 2018.

34 For instance, John Mór of Antrim appears as an ally of Richard II on numerous Anglo-French truces during the 1390s; see *Foedera* vii, 622-29, 639-40, 656-8, 714-16, 777, 824.

IV built upon this relationship. On 5 July 1402 John Mór of Antrim entered into an indenture with Henry for his newly acquired lands in Antrim.[35] Earlier that summer, on 22 June, the Scots were routed by the English at the battle of Nisbet Moor. This defeat, coupled with the defection of George Dunbar, earl of March, left southern Scotland exposed to further attack. Robert, duke of Albany, immediately raised a large army to plug the southern defences. However, an attack on the northern town of Elgin on 3 July by Donald and John Mór's brother, Alexander of Lochaber, forced Albany to divert men and resources away from the Anglo-Scottish marches.[36] Overstretched, the Scots suffered a catastrophic defeat against the English at the battle of Halidon Hill on 7 September 1402.

Due to the fragmentary nature of surviving sources, it is difficult to determine if the attack on Elgin was a coordinated Anglo-MacDonald manoeuvre designed to draw Scottish forces away from the borders. The fact that Donald, Lord of the Isles, and John Mór had been in negotiations with Henry IV does suggest some level of planning. Furthermore, the death and capture of so many Scottish nobles at Halidon Hill created a power vacuum in northern Scotland which Donald and his brother quickly moved to exploit, pushing further into northern Scotland.[37] Donald, in particular, took a more active role in the region and pursued his claim to the coveted earldom of Ross. The death of Alexander Leslie, the heir to earldom of Ross, at Halidon Hill exacerbated tensions between Donald and Albany. Leslie had married Albany's daughter Isobel in the early 1390s, and the duke now sought to safeguard his interests and those of his granddaughter, Euphemia, against the lord of the Isles.[38] Conversely, Donald had been married to Euphemia's aunt, Mariota, and believed he had the stronger claim to the earldom.

The military threat of the MacDonalds and the danger of the Scots becoming irreversibly stretched on two fronts forced Albany to delegate the defence of northern-Scotland to his younger brother, Alexander Stewart, the infamous 'Wolf' of Badenoch. From 1404 onwards the Wolf and his sons, most notably his eldest, Alexander, earl of Mar, strove to contain the MacDonalds.[39] Matters changed in early 1406 when the heir to Scottish throne, Prince James (d.1437), was captured by English pirates and taken to the court of Henry IV.

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35   Simms 2009, 152, no. 51.
36   *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis*, 382-3. Albany was already busy with the situation in northern Scotland in the early summer of 1402 - see Boardman 1997, 256-260.
37   This included the seizing of Dingwall castle. The castle was taken sometime between 1405 and 1411. The duke of Albany issued a charter from Dingwall in 1405 but was forced to retake the castle in 1412, see *Scotichronicon* viii, 77.
38   For an account of this see Boardman 1997, 258-261.
39   For the activities of the Wolf and his sons, see Boardman 1996, 1-30; Brown 1996, 31-54.

The prince's capture coupled with the death of his father, Robert III, in April 1406 saw Albany assume governorship of Scotland.[40] During this time Donald and John Mór negotiated both with Henry IV's administration and the captive king of Scots. In 1407 Donald dispatched his nephew, Hector MacLean, to James I in England, while in June 1411 Donald's chaplain, John Lyons, entered James I's household.[41] Donald may have hoped to acquire James I's blessing for his campaign to seize the earldom of Ross, which culminated in the battle of Harlaw on 24 July 1411.[42]

The outcome of Harlaw, which saw Donald's several thousand-strong host combat the Earl of Mar's army, is debated.[43] However, the fact remains that Donald, in the years following the battle, was able to secure his hold over much of north-western Scotland, becoming the de facto earl of Ross. Albany had little choice but to make an uneasy peace with Donald and his kinsmen.[44] Though James I may have originally offered his tacit support for Donald's ventures, upon returning to Scotland in April 1424 he would quickly come to regard the lords of the Isles as a serious threat to royal authority.

James I and the Irish Sea world

Following the death of Henry V in 1422 the English council became concerned about a French resurgence on continent.[45] The Lancastrian regime was thus willing to ransom James I in exchange for Scottish neutrality in the conflict.[46] Upon returning to Scotland, James set about dismantling the political and territorial hegemony of his kinsmen, the Albany Stewarts.

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40 Prince James was ambushed alongside Earl Henry of Orkney and Sir David Fleming by Sir James Douglas of Balvenie at Hermiston Moor while on progress in central Lothian. Fleming was killed and Orkney and the young prince fled eastwards to Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth seeking a ship to take them to the relative safety of France. After a month of uncertain waiting a ship was secured but captured en route to France by pirates from Norfolk. See Boardman 1997, 290-297.

41 *CPR 1405-8*, 363; *Rotuli Scotiae* ii, 196-7.

42 Nicholson 1978, 234.

43 The general consensus is that the battle ended in a bloody stalemate. The primary sources differ in their interpretation, for which, see Olson 2014, chapters 3-5. It is also worth noting that the contemporary Gaelic Irish annals point to a MacDonald victory, *ALC*, 1411.

44 *Scotichronicon* viii, 77. Exchequer records from 1414 and 1415 indicate that Albany had brought a force to Lochgilp to meet with Donald see ER iv, 213, 239.

45 MacDougall 2001, 71; Harriss 2005, 533.

46 Not only had an estimated 15,000 Scottish soldiers served in French armies between 1419 and 1424 but in March 1421 a Franco-Scottish force defeated an English army at Baugé, killing the heir presumptive to the English throne, Thomas, duke of Clarence. For Baugé, see *Scotichronicon* viii, 113, 119-121; *Liber Pluscardensis* ii, 266-8; Nicholson 1978, 251. For Scots in French armies, see Ditcham 1989, 1-13; Brown 2004, 216; MacDougall 2001, 56-73; Hunt 2008, 137-9; Nicholson 2014, 88-100.

This was achieved through a series of legal proceedings, culminating in the forfeiture and execution of his cousin, Murdoch, duke of Albany and his leading adherents, including his eldest son, Walter.[47] James failed, however, to apprehend Murdoch's remaining son, James the Fat (d.1429), who fled to Ireland where he found shelter with John Mór in Antrim.[48]

James the Fat's flight into Ireland has often been remarked upon, yet the broader significance of his exile there remains to be examined. It is debateable whether or not James the Fat fled to Antrim immediately. Donald, lord of the Isles, died in 1423 and was succeeded by his son, Alexander, who initially appears to have enjoyed cordial relations with James I. Alexander had, in May 1425, served on the royal justice assize which ultimately condemned the Albany Stewarts; James the Fat certainly had cause to be wary of Alexander and his kinsmen in Antrim.[49] One can suggest a number of plausible reasons why James the Fat fled to Antrim soon after escaping Scotland. Though source material relating to Hiberno-Scottish interaction for these years is limited, it appears that James I came to some form of arrangement with the O'Donnells not long after assuming power in Scotland.[50] This is perhaps one of the main reasons why James the Fat fled to Antrim (a lordship traditionally hostile to the Albany regime) rather than Tyrconnell.

It is very possible that Alexander's participation in the aforementioned assize represented an attempt to curry favour with James I - most likely to gain the king's support for MacDonald 'acquisitions' in Ross. Their possession (or detainment) of James the Fat in Antrim - a territory beyond the Scottish king's jurisdiction - gave them a powerful bargaining chip; the fact that James I was as-of-yet without a legitimate heir placed James the Fat next in line to the Scottish throne.[51] Likewise, from James the Fat's perspective, the military clout possessed by the MacDonalds not only provided him with powerful protectors; under the circumstances, he stood an excellent chance of reclaiming his position in Scotland with MacDonald support. However, the king's reluctance to fully acknowledge Alexander's claims upon Ross, coupled with ongoing military and political tensions in northern Scotland, placed great strain upon Alexander's relationship with the king.

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47   His other son, Alexander, and the elderly Earl Duncan of Lennox were also executed. *Scotichronicon* xviii, 245. For an account of this see Brown 1994, chapter 2; Nicholson 1978, 281-8.

48   *Scotichronicon* xviii, 245; *Holinshed's Chronicles* v, 419.

49   *Scotichronicon*, xviii, 245.

50   The English council in Dublin believed that the O'Donnells were in league with James I by the summer of 1424, see *RCH* 233/15.

51   Indeed as Michael Brown has noted, James the fat had the potential to raise support across large areas of south western Scotland (particularly in Lennox) from former Albany adherents, see Brown, 1994, 74-5.

James I took steps to limit James the Fat's capacity to cause unrest. In 1426 the king issued legislation in order to regulate the movement of ships between Ireland and Scotland.[52] In 1427 he reinforced Inverness castle before personally leading an expedition there in August 1428 to meet with Alexander and the leading Highland and Island lords.[53] James initially presented this expedition as a peaceful undertaking, but upon arrival he had Alexander and his adherents arrested.[54] While the chronology surrounding this episode is difficult to determine, Alexander's cousin and lord of Antrim, John Mór, appears to have been captured and subsequently released shortly before the Inverness seizures in August 1428. Soon after John Mór's release, James reputedly offered him the title to lordship of the Isles if he would break with Alexander. This ploy proved hugely counter-productive: upon refusal John Mór was murdered by the royal messenger.[55] The killing sparked a major backlash in the Isles. John Mór's son and successor as lord of Antrim, Domnall Balloch, and his cousin Alasdair Carrach (son of Alexander of Lochaber) led a revolt against royal power in western Scotland in the early spring of 1429. Faced with a growing crisis along the western seaboard, James agreed to release Alexander in exchange that he rein in his kinsmen.[56] The lord of the Isles was unwilling to do so and subsequently burned Inverness.[57] Around the same time, the *Annals of the Four Masters* record that a Scottish fleet arrived in Ireland with the intention of placing James the Fat on the Scottish throne.[58]

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52 *RPS* 1426/22-23-24 11-13.
53 For the reinforcing of the castle see, *RMS*, ii, no. 53; Scotichronicon, viii, 259.
54 *Scotichronicon* viii, 259; *Highland Papers* i, 35-6; *RMS* iii, no. 115.
55 *Highland Papers* i, 38-9. The royal messenger was one James Campbell. Michael Brown (1994, 100) has suggested that James Campbell was a minor kinsman of Ducan Campbell, the lord of Loch Awe in Argyll, a former Albany supporter and that he may have represented a friendly negotiator due to his faction's previous ties to Duke Murdoch. Conversely, Stephen Boardman (2005, 126-127) has pointed out that the Campbells were out of royal favour at this time, and due to discrepancies in the primary sources, the identification of James Campbell (an uncommon name in that kindred) remains uncertain.
56 James I kept Alexander's mother, Countess Mary, in captivity as a hostage for good behaviour. In August 1429 Mary was moved to Inchcolm Castle where she spent the next fourteen months (*Scotichronicon*, viii, 263). She was finally released from royal custody in February 1433 (*Scotichronicon.*, viii, 277). Alexander's release on 'good behaviour' is dealt with in Bower's chronicle and is the main line taken by Michael Brown, who suggests that James may have dangled the possibility of a fair hearing over the earldom of Ross - see *Scotichronicon* viii 261; Brown 1994, 100-1. However, the *Book of Pluscarden* states that Alexander escaped from captivity in Inverness before being counselled into rebellion by 'evil men' (namely his cousins); see *Liber Pluscardensis* ii, 283. By April 1429 James, highly concerned about the situation in the west, ordered all fugitives to be treated as rebels, RPS 1429/4/2.
57 *Scotichronicon* viii, 261, *Liber Pluscardensis* ii, 283.
58 *AFM* 1429.

Though the commander of the fleet is not specified, it appears most likely that this plan was orchestrated by Alexander and Domnall Balloch.

Although James the Fat died before this plan could be put into effect, the king had been given serious cause for concern.[59] A royal victory over the MacDonalds at Lochaber on 23 June briefly tipped the conflict in James I's favour, but an equally spectacular victory by Domnall Balloch's forces over another royal army at Inverlochy in 1431 returned matters to a stalemate.[60] Faced with this difficult scenario, James I looked westward to the O'Donnells in the hopes of dealing a knockout blow against Domnall Balloch. By the early 1430s the O'Donnells, under the leadership of Niall Garbh, had reached the peak of their powers, and for a time even the normally assertive O'Neills of Tyrone had fallen under the O'Donnell hegemony.[61] Though it is beyond the remit of this present essay, there is evidence suggesting that James may have conceived of some form of combined Scottish-O'Donnell assault on English power in Ireland during the late 1420s,[62] but the threat posed by the MacDonalds in eastern Ulster and the Isles posed a serious obstacle to any such form of joint Stewart-O'Donnell military intervention in Ireland. The solution for the king of Scots was obvious: James now sought to bring the military power of the O'Donnells to bear on the MacDonald's western flank in Ireland.

59 Michael Brown has also pointed out that James I knew of his cousin's death by 21 April 1429,(Brown, 1994 103, 107, no. 47).

60 *Scotichronicon* viii, 263. The king's men secured the castles of Darnaway, Spynie, Urquhart and Dingwall after their victory at Lochaber. For MacDonald victory at Inverlochy, see *Highland Papers* i, 40-2; *Scotichronicon* viii, 265-7. While Michael Brown (1994, 138) has suggested that Domnall Balloch was only able to raise a small force due to the absence of more powerful northern Hebridean kindred such as the MacLeans of Mull, the MacNeills and the MacLeods, Simon Kingston has challenged this and pointed out that Domnall Balloch's force was instead very substantial, including some of the most powerful lords in Isles (Kingston, 1999, 40-1; Idem, 2004, 58-9.

61 Though Katherine Simms has traced the development of the O'Donnell lordship during the early fifteenth century, her research is primarily focused on affairs within the lordship of Tyrconnell and Ulster. Much of Niall Garbh's power derived from his ability to maintain and expand upon the alliance network originally created by his father, Turlough an Fhíona O'Donnell, in the late fourteenth century. Under Niall Garbh, the O'Donnell alliance network came to encompass much of the northern half of Ireland, extending across Ulster, Connacht and northern Leinster. For details of this, see *AU*, 1422-33; *ALC*, 1422-33; *AC*, 1422-33; *AFM*, 1422-33.

62 For instance, in March 1428 the Irish council in Dublin received intelligence that O'Donnell had sent to Scotland for a large force of soldiers (see RCH 246/21). The castle of Carrickfergus was subsequently granted a £10 subsidy to bolster the defences in the event of an attack from Scotland. Furthermore, the English government also sought to communicate with James the Fat during his time in Antrim, possibly to use him as a dynastic puppet in Scotland (*Foedera* x, 415).

In the summer of 1433 Niall Garbh marched a large army eastward across Ulster; judging by the ensuing course of events, the main objective appears to have been an attack on Antrim.[63] If this was indeed Niall Garbh's aim, then it proved to be a major miscalculation. Unbeknownst to O'Donnell, Alexander and Domnall Balloch had negotiated an alliance with Eoghan O'Neill of Tyrone – the only Ulster-based magnate still capable of challenging O'Donnell.[64] Caught unawares, O'Donnell's army was routed in the Dufferin and Niall Garbh was forced to flee into northern Leinster. Alexander and Eoghan moved westwards on Tyrconnell with the lord of the Isles taking his fleet along the coast, eventually landing on Inishowen while Eoghan led his force by land. More striking, as noted by Simon Kingston, is that the annals suggest that the MacDonalds, rather than Eoghan O'Neill, directed the attack on Tyrconnell.[65] Eoghan was undoubtedly more than willing to reduce O'Donnell to obedience. The fact that Alexander orchestrated the alliance with the O'Neills and personally directed the assault on Tyrconnell however, further underlines the seriousness of the threat posed by the O'Donnell-Stewart connection to MacDonald interests.[66] Together, Alexander and Eoghan then forced the remnant of Niall Garbh's lordship commanded by his wife, Fionula O'Connor of Offaly, to surrender. Niall Garbh attempted to raise support in Leinster and Connacht but with little success. Before the year was out Niall Garbh was forced to submit to Eoghan and acknowledge him as the pre-eminent lord in Ulster.[67]

Conclusion

Alexander's intervention in Ulster transformed the balance of power within the wider Irish Sea world. In Ireland, the implosion of the O'Donnells had a domino effect on their alliance networks, which quickly collapsed in

63   *AU*, 1433, *AFM*, 1433.
64   Though the O'Neills had become severely weakened due to internecine feuding in the early fifteenth century, Eoghan O'Neill had, by the early 1430s, managed to rebuild some of his political clout in Ulster - see *AU*, 1429-33; *ALC*, 1429-33; *AC*, 1429-33; *AFM*, 1429-33.
65   *AU*, 1433; Kingston 2004, 190-2.
66   The later seventeenth century Sleat History mentions that Alexander campaigned in Ireland and was killed there. While the place of his death in uncertain, the fact that he did not die until 1448, fifteen years after the 1433 expedition, points to a later intervention in Irish affairs (*Highland Papers* i, 47). Additionally, the poet Tadhg Óg Ó'hUiginn addressed a poem to Alexander prior his death in 1448 extolling him to bring his forces to Ireland once again, but whether this relates to his death is uncertain, and it is likely that he died in Scotland, probably in the Earldom of Ross - see Aithdioghluim dána i, 114-18, ii, 69-71. Most striking about this poem is that Alexander is named earl of Ross 'Iarla Rois' by Ó'hUiginn, see also Boardman 2013, 167-8, no. 54.
67   AFM, 1433.

the face of the resurgent O'Neills. With the Irish option exhausted, James I was forced to come to terms with Alexander of the Isles. By late 1436 the king had little choice but to award Alexander the earldom of Ross.[68] The aggrandisement of the O'Neills in Ireland and the MacDonalds in Scotland had, in turn, a profound impact upon the course of British politics. It is no coincidence that during the Wars of the Roses, the House of York viewed the O'Neills and MacDonalds as valuable allies, capable of curtailing Scottish and Lancastrian intrigues within the wider Irish Sea world.[69] The dominance of these factions would, however, eventually be eclipsed. While the collapse of O'Donnell power had helped to facilitate the rise of the O'Neill and MacDonald dynasties, the resurgence of O'Donnells in the second half of the 15th century would see the O'Neill-MacDonald grip on the northern Irish Sea world falter.[70] This, in conjunction with the rise of the Campbells of Argyll and the expansion of royal Stewart power westward, would place enormous strain on the once mighty MacDonald lordship and result in the political disintegration of the lordship of the Isles in the 1480s and 1490s.[71] Ultimately, this paved the way for the later Stewart kings, James IV (d.1513) and James V (d.1542), to meddle in Ireland as they saw fit.[72]

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68   For an account of this, see Brown 1994, chapter 7.
69   Simms 1981, 214-36; Petre 2015, 599-628.
70   For the resurgence of O'Donnell power, see MacGettigan 203-24.
71   For the rise of the Campbells, see Dawson 1988, 1-27; Idem 2002; Boardman 2005.
72   For an overview of the ongoing Stewart 'interest' in Ireland, see Cathcart 2007, 124-143.

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