

Military History of Clan MacKay



Crest of Clansfolk of Clan MacKay

A comprehensive, full account of the military contributions made by Clan Mackay is not possible within the scope of this web site. Throughout history the Mackay Regiments achieved great military honour and glory. In her history, *The Clan Mackay*, Margaret O. MacDougall briefly outlines the many battles fought and victories won fought by Mackay military forces.

Particular mention must be made of the regiment, *Mackay's Invincibles*, raised by Sir Donald Mackay of Farr (First Lord Reay) in 1626 for service on the Continent in the Protestant cause during The Thirty Years War. Donald Mackay recruited men from Sutherland, of whom the vast majority were Mackays from his own territory. This regiment became famous for its bravery in combat on the River Elbe, and later for its valiant holding of the Pass at Oldenburg against overwhelming odds in attacks by Marshall Tilly.

The Mackays were actively anti-Jacobite during the 1715 uprising and again in 1745. However, some fought on the side of Prince Charlie. Seventeen Mackays from various Jacobites regiments were prisoners of war following the Battle of Culloden. Nine of these Mackays were transported to Barbados.

During the wars against the French in the late 1700's, three Sutherland Fencible Regiments were raised. The first, was formed in 1759 and disbanded in 1763 "with the honorable distinction of having no man punished, nor had any restrictions been required during its term of service". All three Fencible Regiments consisted mainly of Mackays.

The fourth fencible regiment, the Reay Fencible Regiment of Foot, or Mackay's Highlanders, is worthy of particular mention. The following article, written by John Mackay (Ben Reay) in 1933, is reprinted with kind permission from the Pictou Advocate.

THE REAY FENCIBLES

- John Mackay (Ben Reay)

Sutherland Fencible Regiments

Four regiments were raised in the county of Sutherland, and finer bodies of men were never brought together in any part of the United Kingdom. Three bore the title of 'Sutherland Fencibles', and the other was designated as the Reay Fencibles. The services of all the Fencible regiments were restricted to military duty in Great Britain and Ireland.

History of the Reay Fencibles

The Royal Warrant for raising the Reay Fencibles was dated 24th October, 1794. Colonel Mackay Hugh Baillie, a military officer of note and experience, and a near kinsman of Hugh, Lord Reay, the

then chief of the Mackays, was selected to command the regiment, and George Mackay of Handa (afterwards designated of Bighouse) was appointed Lieutenant Colonel.

The strength of the regiment was fixed at 800 men, and a few weeks sufficed to obtain the required number. When placed on the Establishment (18th June, 1795) it consisted of 46 officers and 754 non-commissioned officers and men, and of these 11 officers and 209 rank and file were Mackays, while 381 had the honourable Gaelic prefix "Mac" to their names. The uniforms of the regiment was similar to that of the 42nd. Scarlet coat with dark blue facings and silver lace, and kilt of Mackay tartan.

The regiment was inspected at Fort George in March, 1795, and after being drilled, uniformed, and armed, was ordered to Ireland, where the steady conduct and soldierly bearing of the men soon attracted the notice of the Generals Lake and Nugent, commanding in that country.

The service of the regiment, which had been stationed in Belfast and neighbourhood, was of an uneventful and routine character until 1798, when the rebellion broke out and assigned formidable proportions. The object of the rising was to bring about the separation of Ireland from Britain, and for this purpose the conspirators had been promised substantial aid from France. A day had been fixed when Ireland was to rise in arms, but the scheme had been made known to the government and many of the leaders were arrested. Those who escaped determined that a general insurrection should take place, and the 23rd of May was fixed upon for that event.

Battle of Tara Hill

It was under these circumstances that the Reays were moved from Belfast to Cavan, and then to Dublin. The battle of Tara Hill was fought on the 26th of May, 1798. In this engagement the rebels had a force of about 4000 men, while the government had only the Reays, less than 800 strong, and two troops of yeomanry. The rebels were well posted on top of the hill, protected by old walls and other shelter, which gave them a great advantage, but the Reays marched boldly on and gradually fought their way up. When reaching the top, notwithstanding the great odds against them, they furiously charged the rebels with the bayonet, tumbling them over at every stroke, and eventually dispersed and chased them off the hill. The yeomanry then charged the retreating masses, who fled panic stricken and in disorder. The loss of the Reays was 30 killed and a considerable number wounded. The rebels had about 500 killed, besides many wounded. It was a complete victory, and the battle broke the back of the rebellion. After this engagement the Reays marched to Dublin, where they met with a hearty reception from the citizens.

History Until Disbanded

But the troubles were not quite ended. On the 22nd August a French force of about 1,300 men landed at Killala. General Lake, hearing of this, hastened with two regiments of Irish Militia, the Fraser, Fencibles, and some dragoons, to resist the advance. The Reays at the same time were ordered to Tuam to keep in check the rebels in the west. General Lake encountered the Frenchmen near Castlebar. The French began the attack and soon threw the Militia into disorder, and they, in retiring, threw the Frasers into disorder, so that the whole gave way, and the French soldiers still advancing, Lake was forced to retire.

Overwhelmed with grief at the unsteady and cowardly conduct of the militia (many of whom went over to the enemy) he was frequently heard to exclaim, "If I had my brave and honest Reays with me, this would not have happened." The Irish insurgents and their French auxiliaries had everything in their own hands for a few days, and they began an indiscriminate slaughter of the Protestants and Loyalists of Castlebar.

But Lake, who had fallen back on Tuam, had reformed his army, and this done, he determined to

attack the Frenchmen. On this occasion he took his "honest Reays" with him. After four days march his advance troops got up to and skirmished with the French, bringing them to a halt. General Lake soon afterwards appeared with the troops under his immediate command, and then all resistance on the part of the Frenchmen ceased; they laid down their arms and surrendered unconditionally; and the Reays had the honour of conducting them as prisoners of war to Dublin. Few Irish were taken, for when they saw the Frenchmen laying down their arms, they threw their own away and fled to the hills. This practically ended the rebellion and comparative tranquility was restored to Ireland.

The Reays were afterwards quartered in various towns for about four years; and in 1802 the regiment was ordered home to Scotland. It embarked at Belfast on the 10th of September, and landing at Stranraer marched to Stirling, where on the 26th of the month, General Baillie gave his parting address to the officers and men, paying high compliments to both, for their loyalty, good discipline, and distinguished gallantry. The regiment was disbanded on the 13th October, 1802.

One of the sergeants of the Reays became famous among "The Men" of Sutherland. This was Joseph Mackay. He served with the regiment until it was disbanded, and afterwards entered the 1st Foot or Royal Scots, and got a commission as Ensign. He was wounded at Waterloo, and returning to his native parish, devoted the remainder of his life - about 40 years - to evangelistic work in the Highlands. Many stories are told of his piety and benevolence; and the few old people left in the Reay country still speak with the greatest reverence of Ensign Joseph.

I cannot do better, in bringing this short story of the Reay Fencibles to an end, than quote what Mr Mackay, Hereford, says in the closing part of his account of the services of the regiment:

They were an honour to their race and to their country, descendants of men who always bravely held their own, and defended their territory against great odds, and who remained ever loyal to their sovereigns, and repeatedly performed great services to the state. They produced heroes and warriors whose fame will remain in the story of their country and on the Continent of Europe. In Ireland, as has been shown, they exhibited many proofs of the valour of their race, and eminently manifested that they were the genuine sons of the valiant Mackays of the North.

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