

The Cummings of Altyre and the search for an ancient genealogy, part 2: ‘Truth has here lain in the bottom of a well’

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ABSTRACT

Part 1 of this study, in Proceedings volume 151 (Cleary 2022), analysed a tradition of descent built by the Gordon Cummings of Altyre, Moray, from a mix of historical fact, legend and romance, claiming descent from one of the two ‘Red Comyns’ killed by the Bruce party in Dumfries, 1306. In a 150-year genealogy linking the Red Comyns to the first verifiable Cumming resident of Altyre, only two of the names were demonstrably historical persons. Part 2 examines the historical evidence for these two individuals and for whether they were related in the way the Altyre tradition claims. It is argued that one of them, but not both, was a lineal ancestor of the Altyre Cummings. The two were more distantly related than tradition claims, and the first – Sir Richard Comyn the Crusader (c 1340–1412 × 1415) – founded a different line of Cummings, that of Coultie, Perthshire. The other, Alexander Cumyne, who contracted to marry a sister of the Dunbar earl of Moray in 1408, almost certainly is the Altyre line’s founder, and through him the Gordon Cummings may be descended from the Red Comyns, but in a different way to constructed tradition. In a remarkable series of letters by the antiquarian lawyer John Riddell, a sound account of the Cummings’ origin was put forward in the 1820s, before being overlooked for 200 years. Transcriptions are presented in an appendix to this article.

INTRODUCTION

A tradition common in genealogical histories of Moray presents the Gordon Cumming family of Altyre as the representatives and patrilineal descendants of the Red Comyns, John and Robert, assassinated by Robert Bruce’s party in Dumfries in 1306. In this tradition, Robert, uncle of the Red Comyn and younger brother of John Comyn the Competitor (d c 1300 × 1303) is an agnatic ancestor of the Cummings (various spellings) of Altyre, recognised as chiefs of a Cumming clan by the time of Culloden, inheriting Gordon of Gordonstoun in 1795 via an earlier marriage and acquiring a new baronetcy shortly afterwards.

However, 150 years separates the Dumfries incident from the first Cumming of Altyre recorded in surviving records. Genealogists such as Douglas (1798) filled the gap with connections ranging from the mythical to the fictive, though some antiquarian historians such as Lachlan Shaw of Moray expressed scepticism about elements of the tradition. The Gordon Cumming family was closely implicated in the construction of the genealogical tradition, sponsoring Elgin journalist John Grant’s updated edition of Shaw’s *History of Moray* (1827), with Shaw’s uncertainty replaced by the firmest affirmation to date of the Red Comyn origin tradition.

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In the later 19th century, two members of the Altyre family further inflated the tradition, adding ingredients of Celtic-revival romanticism to what had up until then been presented as an antiquarian-historical enquiry. Mary Cumming-Bruce's *Family Records of the Bruces and the Cumyns* (1870) added additional generations of doubtful provenance to the 14th-century genealogy to create a narrative of Comyn refuge among Highlanders hostile to Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray under Robert I. Her great-niece, the poet Eliza Gordon Cumming (Lady Middleton, 1847–1922), reworked legends heard in her youth concerning a feud between a Cumming 'clan' and Randolph, with tragic outcomes for the Cummings, into her long ballad *The Story of Alasdair Bhan Comyn; Or, The Tragedy of Dunphail, a Tale of Tradition and Romance* (1889). A theme through much of this work is a determination to recover lost status and wider renown, reversing perceived blackening of the Comyn name by historians and exclusion of the family from national political life. In the year Grant published his edition of Shaw, the Gordon Cumming baronet unsuccessfully petitioned the British government for elevation to the peerage on the grounds of the proclaimed genealogy.

The first part of this extended article (Cleary 2022) advances a fuller discussion of the Cummings' interactions with historians that embellished and elaborated the 'official story' origin tradition. In Part 2, attention will turn to what can be salvaged from surviving records of the 14th- and early-15th-century history of the Comyns re-emerging as – or having their place taken by – the Cummings of Altyre. Two significant individuals visible in the historical records of this period will be investigated as potential ancestors, and the contribution of a legal antiquarian who delivered enhanced rigour to the question of Cumming origins will be considered.

THE VERIFIED CUMMING OF ALTYRE DESCENT LINE

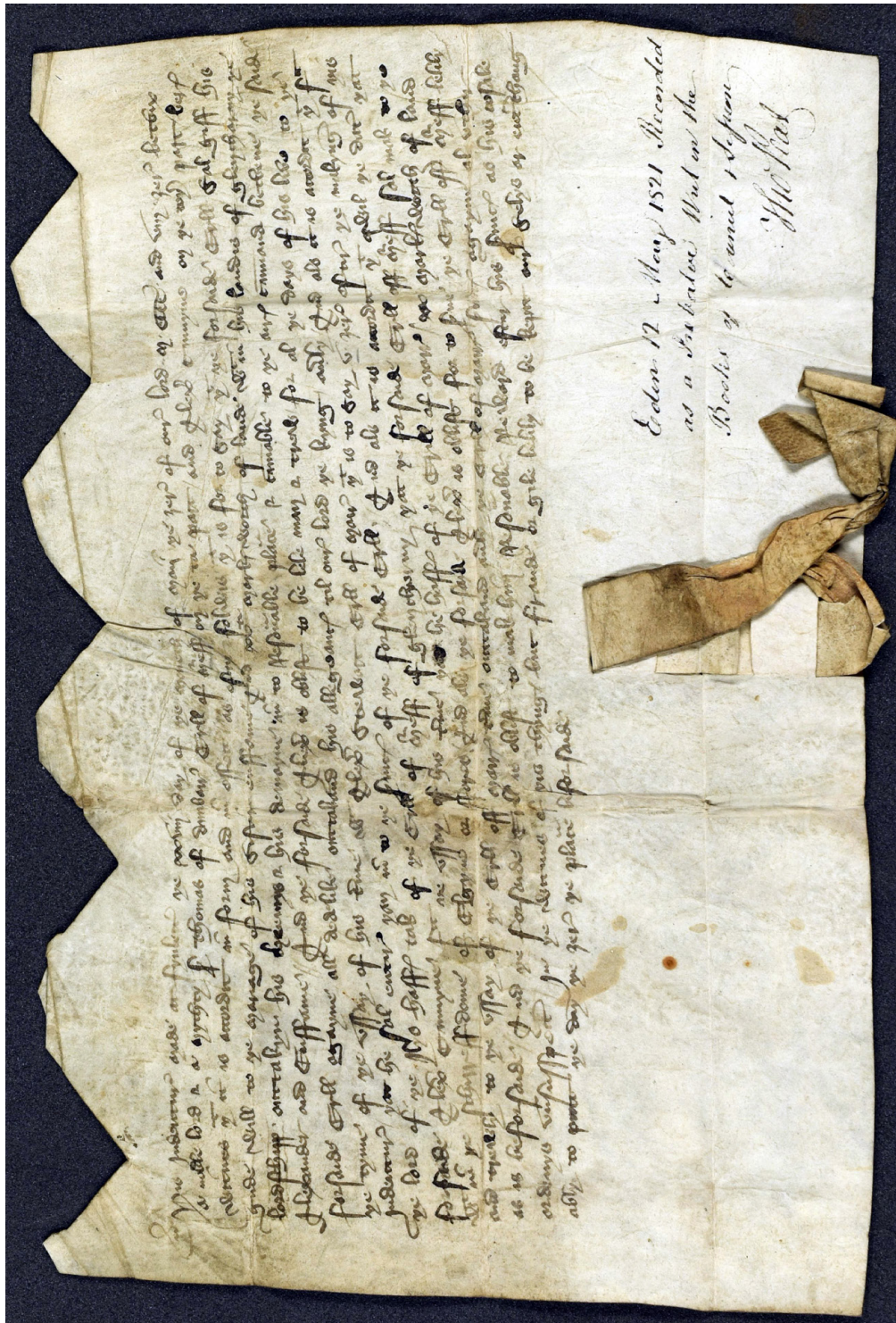
The Gordon Cumming family papers, deposited at the National Library of Scotland, establish the

occupation of Altyre by a Cumming by 1456. Thomas Cuming 'lord of Altre', under threat of excommunication, accepted that the Altyre mill was owned by the Pluscarden Priory, after consultation with his brothers Alexander, John and Robert.¹ This document is not original, being a 1551 notarial transumpt made by Pluscarden, when it appears Altyre and the Priory were once again in conflict over land rights in the barony. The oldest original document in the collection naming Thomas as 'baron of Altre' is a 1460 charter confirming his purchase of the barony of Dollas (Moray).² The charters and sasines have been calendared and abstracted up to 1800,³ many of them indicating genealogical relationships between the Altyre barons and their successors. For example, a 1488 sasine transferred the barony to 'Alexander Cumyn son and heir to the deceased Thomas Cumyn of Auldtre',⁴ and in such manner, a complete tree was constructed downwards from Thomas with every relationship verified. However, this still left a gap of 150 years from the assassination of the Comyns, which Douglas and Cumming-Bruce used their imaginations to fill.

THE DUNBAR MARRIAGE OF ALEXANDER CUMYNE, 1408

Although most of the individuals Douglas and Cumming-Bruce cite between 1306 and 1456 appear fictive, two verifiable, historical persons of interest exist in this descent tradition (Cleary 2022: 251, illus 4). The first, Alexander Cumyne, is visible briefly in the record, binding himself to the service of Thomas Dunbar, Earl of Moray, in 1408 and contracting to marry Moray's sister Euphemia.⁵ This document (Illus 1) was rediscovered in 1821 and received with some excitement by the Gordon Cummings,⁶ carrying as it did the promise of extending their verifiable ancestry back to an individual born in the 14th century.

Cumyne swore to serve the earl 'oblist to be lele man and trew for all the days of his live', after exiting from service to the Earl of Mar five years hence. In return Moray promised



ILLUS 1 Indenture between Thomas Dunbar, Earl of Moray and Alexander Cumyng, 28 May 1408. (Reproduced with permission of The Goodwood Estate Archives and National Records of Scotland (NRS GD44/13/10/1))

to support Cumyne's marriage to Euphemia and 20 marks' worth of land in Glencarnie (Moray). Land in this strategic lordship (see Ross 2003) would have been a major acquisition for Cumyne, who looks the winner from this bargain. He must have had something to offer the earl in return – armed followers or a warband capable of contributing to the defence of Moray. The broader context was the growing struggle to control the earldom of Ross between Domhnall, Lord of the Isles, and Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany, and Governor of Scotland in the absence of the young King James. This followed several decades' conflict between Albany and his brother Alexander Stewart, 'the Wolf of Badenoch', over control of the northern territories of Ross, Moray, Buchan and Mar, ended by Alexander's death in 1405. With central power weak in this period, the North became the site of power struggles between magnates, many of them representing competing branches of Stewarts. Alliances revolved, with the Wolf's son Alexander Stewart gaining the earldom of Mar, reconciling with his uncle Albany as both perceived a greater threat to their interests in the North from Domhnall and the Islanders. Moray, having been a bitter rival of the 'Wolf' (Grant 1993), moved into uneasy alliance with Mar. It is in this context that Cumyne, seemingly a bondsman of Mar, could transfer to Moray's service, presumably with Mar's blessing. Moray, in a much weaker position than Mar, being nearer the contested territory while lacking a strong regional or kin-based network to resist disorder in the Highland parts of his territory, also harboured designs on the Ross earldom (Boardman 2015). Cumyne's transfer of allegiance may have been accepted in the interest of all parties if it reinforced Moray's position, while Mar may have considered it a useful foothold within Moray to further his own interests there (Brown 1996: 36–7).

ARMORIAL EVIDENCE

Although little is known of Alexander Cumyne other than this indenture, he probably had means

to raise fighters and may already have possessed landholdings in Moray. A manuscript history of the Mackintoshes alludes to a 15th-century feud with an Alexander Cummins of Nairn and Rait (*Gen Coll*, 1900: 185), from which Brown (1996: 52n66) suggested that the bond with Moray was in consequence of Cumyne seeking protection. But this 'feud' seems likely to be an echo or folk memory of the skirmishing around Harlaw (in 1411), where the Mackintoshes were in opposition to Mar; and Cumyne appears to gain more from the arrangement than Moray. It is plausible that he represented a continuing, small-scale Comyn lordship in some part of the north-east, fitting Altyre's belief of continuity within the region. There is no evidence of connection between Alexander and the lands that would become the barony of Altyre by 1456, but it is a reasonable conclusion that he was the father or grandfather of Thomas cited as Lord of Altyre in 1456, 48 years after the Cumyne–Dunbar marriage contract.

The Gordon Cumming brothers of 1821 were excited at the possibility that their ancestors may once have held Glencarnie, which legendary accounts had claimed as Cumming land. William Fraser demonstrated that Glencarnie was never in Cumming hands (Fraser 1883: lii, 53). In fact, as Glencarnie was leased to the Lord of the Isles at the time of the Cumyne–Dunbar indenture, Moray was obliged to substitute Glencarnie with 'xx markis worth of land within the schirreffdome of Elgyne or Fores' as promised in the contract,⁷ these warrandice lands probably becoming permanent holdings, in time emerging as the estate of Altyre.

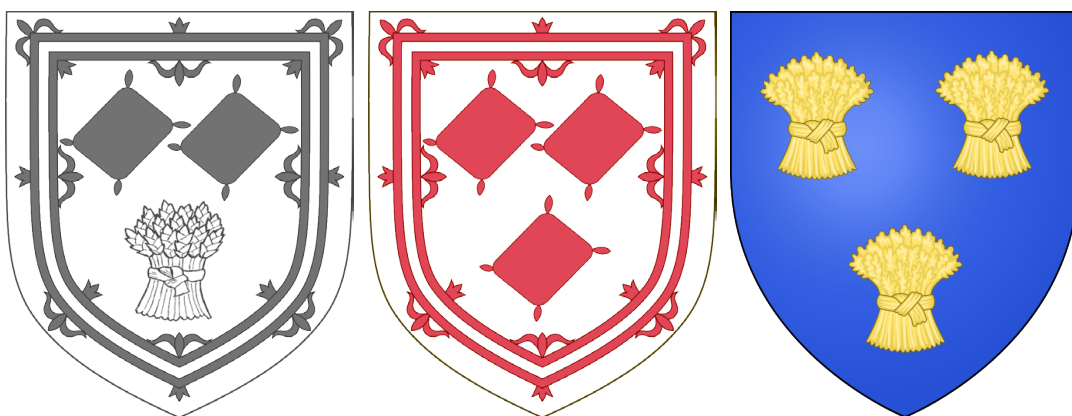
If the marriage was concluded quickly, and not delayed until Cumyne left Mar's service for Moray's, Thomas could have been born as early as 1409 and been 47 years of age at the time of his dispute with Pluscarden. Armorial evidence supports this in the seal of Thomas Cumming of Altyre on a bond of warrandice made to Alexander Dunbar of Westfield in 1476 (Illus 2a).⁸ Blazoned 'Two cushions in chief; a garb in base; all within a double tressure flowered' (Laing, *Seals*: #224), it is sketched in Illus 2b (without tinctures, being



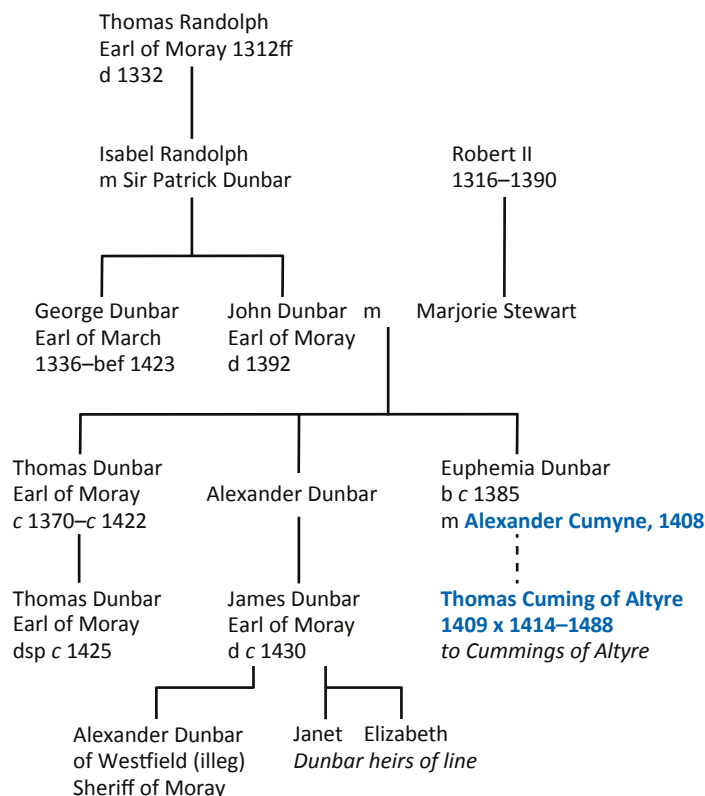
ILLUS 2A The seal of Thomas Cuming of Altyre (1476). (Reproduced with permission of National Records of Scotland, Dunbar of Westfield collection (GD466, formerly NRAS 3094/71))

a seal). The usual Comyn ‘three garbs or’ is presented alongside the arms of the Comyn earl of Buchan (right), displaying the azure field identified with the Buchan Comyns (and later used by Altyre), and those of the Randolph earls of Moray, adopted by the Dunbar earls too as representing the earldom. The 1476 Altyre seal merges two Dunbar cushions and a single Comyn garb into what Stodart (1881, vol 2: 30) termed ‘a curious instance of composed arms’ because of the prominence given to the maternal charges, presuming Euphemia Dunbar to be Thomas Cuming’s mother (Illus 3).

Another way of looking at it is as a differenced form of the Dunbar-Moray arms, one Comyn garb replacing a single Moray cushion. The ‘royal’ double tressure could have been adopted as an element of the Moray arms inherited from Randolph; but if Thomas Cuming was the son of Euphemia Dunbar, the consequent maternal descent from Robert II could also explain the use of this device (McAndrew 2006: 372). This forms compelling evidence that Thomas was the son of the Cumyne–Dunbar marriage, with his barony created from the warrandice lands promised to his father by Thomas Dunbar as dowry and reward for his service.



ILLUS 2B Diagram of arms of Thomas Cuming of Altyre from a seal in Illus 2a (left), compared with those of the Randolph and Dunbar earls of Moray (centre) and Comyn earls of Buchan (right). (Wikimedia Commons CC-BY-SA. Image modifications: Cuming arms assembled from Moray arms by author; tincture of the Moray field corrected to argent)



ILLUS 3 Relationships between Cumming of Altyre and Dunbars in Moray, if Thomas Cumming was offspring of the 1408 marriage. Cumming's descent from the monarch in the female line may have justified the double tressure used in his 1476 armorial seal, presented in Illus 2. (Image by John Cleary)

RICHARD COMYN, KING DAVID'S KNIGHT CRUSADER

The Altyre tradition claims as Alexander's father or grandfather Richard Comyn, the second verifiable historical person, an individual who appears to have had a long and influential career as a crusading esquire in the time of David II, and later as a knight in the circle of Robert Stewart, variously guardian or governor of Scotland. If this is the same person, as seems likely, then his public life extended past the date of the Cumyne–Dunbar marriage, and reached back into the 1350s. Including him within the Altyre ancestral line would leave a more bridgeable half-century from the assassination of the Comyns in 1306; but the weakness for the Altyre case is the lack of evidence

that Richard Comyn was a direct antecedent of Alexander Cumyne.

Michael Penman (2002, 2004) and Stephen Boardman (1996) both identified Richard Comyn as a minor court figure in their studies of David II and the early Stewart kings, seeing him as one of a chivalric and crusading circle of squires and knights favoured by David following his return from captivity in England in 1357, who permitted the king some vicarious enjoyment of the crusader life that he could not experience for himself. From safe conducts to travel in England in David's reign, through grants of land and revenues, to regularly witnessing charters for Robert Stewart after 1390, Comyn's visibility in the documentary record allows a reasonably complete biography to be written for him, to be presented here.

A BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD COMYN,
ESQUIRE AND KNIGHT
(C 1340–C 1412 × 1415)

EARLY CAREER: THE CRUSADING ESQUIRE

Richard Comyn's origins are obscure, appearing first in the record in 1358 as a valet of Thomas Stewart, Earl of Angus, granted safe conduct by Edward III of England to travel to Flanders alongside another valet, James of Edinburgh, to meet with Angus (*Rot Scot I*: 821). Angus was a hostage following the release of the king of Scots from English captivity, which he had played a role in negotiating. Comyn and James journeyed to Flanders with a small retinue of eight horse, perhaps to aid Angus's return to Scotland after a term as hostage in guarantee of David's ransom.

Comyn next appears in the record a decade later, in a party of knights and squires accompanying the crusader Sir Walter Leslie on an expedition to England in January 1367/8 (*Rot Scot I*: 919). Leslie, a younger son of the Leslies of Fife, maternally related to Abernethys in Perthshire and Lindsays in Angus, built a reputation as a renowned crusader, having started his career as a squire in Angus's retinue before the latter's fall from influence after David II's return. Leslie would prove adept at adapting to Scotland's changing regimes through his life (Boardman 2004), a skill Comyn would also acquire to his benefit. King David was attracted to notions of chivalry, enjoying tournaments and favouring knights returning from crusading adventures in the Baltic in the 1350s and Alexandria in the 1360s (MacQuarrie 1997: 80–5). Leslie's active crusader way of life earned him a place in David's court, even if much of Leslie's adventuring abroad had been spent in mercenary activity in France and Italy rather than propagating chivalric Christendom (Watson 2021). Comyn also managed the transition from Angus's to David's favour, probably as a camp follower of Leslie; his invisibility in the decade between the two safe conducts is likely down to accompanying Leslie on crusading expeditions in Italy and the Levant. Penman (2004: 361n88) suggests that the large party of knights that Leslie led to England in

1368 was to participate in a tournament. In June 1369, Comyn 'scutifer [squire] de Scotia' was granted another safe conduct for a year, alongside Leslie and James Sinclair (*Rot Scot I*: 931), on this occasion to join David at the English court, for which Comyn received expenses of 10 marks (*ER II*: 348).

EARLIEST SUCCESS: GRANT OF DUNPHAIL
AND DARNAWAY FOREST

Though still relatively young, Comyn's position in the Scottish court was cemented in January 1368/9 by David's award of the office of forester of Darnaway Forest (Moray), formerly Thomas Randolph's hunting ground, along with lands at 'Develly' (*RMS I*: #285) – this being interpreted as 'valley of the Divie', or today's Dunphail (Fraser 1883: 164). It was this grant in particular that led the Altyre historians to claim him as a link ancestor, seeing this act as a restoration of Comyn lands from the old lordship of Badenoch, feeding a tale of Comyn survival in Moray throughout the 14th-century disruption of Comyn power and status. David rewarded Comyn further in 1369 with a pension arising from the lands of the 'two Carnousies' in Banffshire (*RMS I*: #353). But Richard's tenure in Moray, whether new or resumed, would be brief, unravelling after David's untimely death less than two years later.

Another way to view David's promotion of courtiers of knightly rank is that they were useful to him in his struggles with powerful magnates, in particular his nephew and heir Robert the High Steward. During David's captivity in England, the latter had built a Scottish power base in the Stewart lands in the west, and increasingly in northern Scotland too. Penman saw Walter Leslie as a central figure in David's plans, 'the leading light of a royalist network in the north' (Penman 2004: 409), aiming to encircle the Steward's holdings in the dormant earldom of Moray with his own supporters. When the Steward acceded as Robert II in 1371, he could have been expected to reward his own retainers over those close to David. But he did not prevent Leslie from inheriting the strategically important earldom of Ross in right of the marriage David had arranged for

him. This may have been good politics, as Robert had other means to limit Leslie's authority in Ross without upending the settlement approved by his predecessor. Comyn found himself less fortunate as pressure grew to restore his Moray holdings to the Grants, who had held them under a 1346 grant from the Randolph earl of Moray, until David awarded them to Comyn. Robert II's charter regranting 'Develly' and the Darnaway forestry to Thomas Le Grant, son of the deceased previous Grant holder, narrates a story of 'some disagreements held between them for some time over the right of both ownership and possession of the [lands and rights]' but that in the end 'they finally agreed by an amicable arrangement, not through force or fear nor in error, but by mere spontaneous agreement and free will' that Comyn would resign the lands to allow Robert to bestow them again on Grant (*Moray Reg.* #22, author's translation).

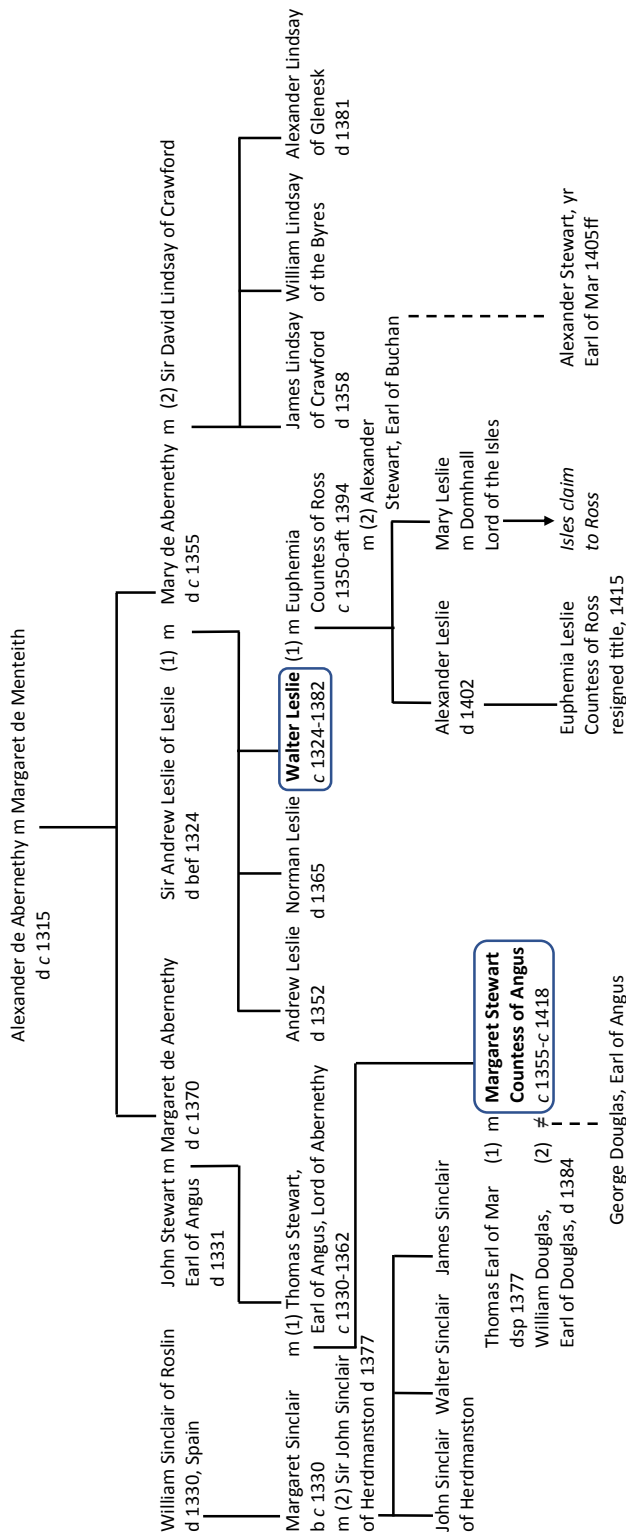
This may also have constituted skilful conflict resolution by the new king, ensuring a loyal henchman's grievance was resolved in his favour while presenting a face of cordial agreement. It was good politics for Comyn too. In gracefully giving ground, he avoided antagonising the new regime. Though latterly David II's man, Comyn's earlier attachment to Angus had placed him within the orbit of the Stewart lords, to whom a show of humility and patience could facilitate alternative advancement. Furthermore, his cohort leader Walter Leslie had survived the Stewart accession and would within the year solidify his own power base through gaining lordship over Ross with the acquiescence of the new king, creating alternative opportunities for his associate's career advancement, the loss of Darnaway and Dunphail notwithstanding.

MID-CAREER: ROSS'S MAN OF BUSINESS AND BEYOND

From 1372 Walter Leslie issued charters as Lord of Ross, often witnessed by Richard Comyn as part of the circle of knights around Leslie, which also included Leslie's half-brothers Alexander and William Lindsay (Boardman 1996: 77n36). In 1380, Comyn witnessed a Leslie grant of land

in Caithness for the first time as Sir Richard Comyn, knight,⁹ and witnessed another Leslie charter in 1381 in Elgin, Moray, again designated as a knight.¹⁰ It has to be wondered whether his knighthood may have been a part of the amicable arrangement to return Dunphail and Darnaway to his Grant rivals. By early 1382, Leslie would be dead, depriving Comyn of his main patron. Boardman (1996: 77) cites charters issued by Leslie's widow Euphemia, the Countess of Ross in her own right, again witnessed by Comyn in the weeks following Leslie's death; but by late spring Alexander Stewart, the Lord or 'Wolf' of Badenoch, had moved to take control at Ross, with Comyn and the Lindsays no longer in evidence.

New patronage was needed for Comyn to continue furthering his interests. The future would see increasing entanglement within the political struggles of the sons of Robert II over the northern earldoms and territories. Returning to earlier associations, Comyn received grants of land for his own use from Margaret Stewart, Countess of Angus and Mar, one of the most politically successful Scottish women of this period. She was daughter and heir of the Stewart earl of Angus who was Comyn's original patron in 1358, and in granting Comyn lands in Angus addressed him as her 'beloved kinsman' (*dilecto consanguineo nostro*).¹¹ Margaret and Walter Leslie were cousins in their maternal lines (Illus 4), Leslie's mother and Margaret's grandmother being daughters of Alexander de Abernethy, the last Gaelic lord of Abernethy, whose title had also passed to Margaret. The Lindsay brothers in Leslie's circle at Ross were younger brothers from Leslie's mother's second marriage, forming a kinship network with Margaret Stewart that Comyn also seems to have been linked to, from the wording of the charter. It is, however, unclear how Comyn was connected to them, other than through his youthful service to Margaret's father. Alexander de Abernethy had been forfeited by Robert Bruce for supporting the Balliol-Comyn side in the wars of independence and died in England, though near the end of his reign, Bruce permitted Abernethy's daughter Margaret to assume her title and raised her husband to Earl



ILLUS 4 Walter Leslie and Margaret Stewart, Countess of Angus, within the wider Abernethy-Leslie-Lindsay kinship network, showing their relationship as first cousins once removed (in modern terms) through their shared Abernethy descent. (Image by John Cleary)

of Angus, another forfeited title (McGladdery 2004). These would pass to Thomas Stewart, Comyn's and Leslie's original patron, and in turn to his daughter Margaret. The Lindsays in contrast were supporters of the Bruce side, which may have opened doors for Leslie and his camp followers into the court of David II.

LATER CAREER: IN THE CIRCLES OF FIFE/ ALBANY

Countess Margaret's grant to Comyn was part of a set of transfers of land and titles she enacted in April 1389, following agreement between her and Robert Stewart, Earl of Fife, now Guardian of Scotland wielding the authority of his ageing father, Robert II. Fife's strategic goals included limiting the power in the North of his brother Alexander 'the Wolf', now Earl of Buchan, preventing the latter from exerting control over Ross during the minority of the Leslie heir. The Leslies-Lindsays were Fife's ultimately successful allies in this struggle (Boardman 1996: 179–80), and Comyn's grant from Margaret may have constituted his introduction to the alliance with Fife. Over the next 20 years, Comyn would regularly witness Robert Stewart's charters.

In February 1396/7, Comyn served on a jury summoned by Fife's son Murdoch Stewart at Aberdeen.¹² In 1398–9 he witnessed charters issued by Fife, now Duke of Albany, at the latter's base of Falkland, along with David Stewart, Duke of Rothesay (the king's son), Archibald 'the Grim', Lord of Galloway, Murdoch Stewart, the bishops of St Andrews and Aberdeen, and George Leslie, another Leslie relative with lands in Fife (*RMS I*: #886)¹³ – illustrious company, indicating Comyn's closeness to Albany's circle. In 1406 he witnessed a grant of Albany, now Governor of Scotland, to found a chapel in Inverkeithing (*RMS I*: #888). The following year, he witnessed two confirmations by Albany of lands to John Stewart, Earl of Buchan (*RMS I*: #892, 893). He witnessed further confirmations by Albany of a hospital charter and a grant of lands in Gogar in 1411 (*RMS I*: #933, 934), and in 1412 appeared before Albany as attorney for Walter Ross of Balnagowan in a dispute with

the Governor.¹⁴ As the last agnatic representative of the earls of Ross, Walter Ross may not have seen Comyn as a natural ally owing to the latter's former closeness to Walter Leslie. But Ross had confronted the Governor, joining the opposition at Harlaw, and Comyn was a useful mediator, having Albany's ear.

EXTENDED FAMILY OF RICHARD COMYN

By the time of the last record, Comyn was likely to be of considerably advanced age for those times. If he was between 15 and 20 when Angus's valet in 1358, by 1412 he would be a septuagenarian, perhaps of similar age to Albany, who would reach the advanced age of 80 while still serving as Governor. In addition to advancing his political position in his latter years, Comyn secured further grants of land for himself. In 1394, John, Abbot of Dunfermline, granted him lands at Coupar-Maccultie (Perthshire), with 5 marks pension from lands at 'Fordoui'.¹⁵ The former is today's Couttie, north of Cupar-Angus, while the latter is more obscure, but perhaps refers to tolls from a ford across the Isla on the Cupar-Blairgowrie road by Couttie, or perhaps to Fordie near Dunkeld (Perthshire). Comyn resigned the lands ten years later for a regrant from the abbot in liferent with inheritance entailed to:

David Cumyne, his natural son, and Christian, daughter of Malise Dawsoun, his wife, the survivor and the heirs male of the said David Cumyne, whom failing to John Cumyne, natural son of the said Sir Richard and his heirs male, whom all failing the said Sir Richard grants that the said lands and annualrent should revert to the said abbey in free alms¹⁶

This is the first sign in the record of family members for Richard Comyn, other than the address by Margaret of Angus, indicating that Comyn had agnatic descendants for at least a further generation. However, neither of them bore the name Alexander expected by Altyre's ancestry claims. It is also notable that in the event of Comyn's sons' heir-male lines failing, the lands were to return to the Abbey, no collateral line nominated

to continue the tenure. This may or may not indicate that Comyn's line was an orphan one, but neither does it strengthen the case that he was the lineal ancestor of Altyre.

RICHARD'S PATERNITY: SURVIVING COMYNS IN SCOTLAND

If Richard Comyn was of Scottish origin his paternity should be sought in one of the Comyn branches known to have persisted in Scotland after Bannockburn. His position as Angus's valet and squire suggests a legitimate birth, unless a powerful father wielded sufficient influence to place him in such service. Two Comyn families that appeared to weather the Bruce era were those of Rowallan (Ayrshire) and Culter (Aberdeenshire). A Walter Comyn was granted or permitted to continue holding lands in Branhholme, Teviotdale (Roxburghshire) by Bruce after Bannockburn (*RMS I*: #24), and a later grant of wardship by David II indicates this was the same family as Walter Comyn of Rowallan (*RMS I*: App ii 776). Hailes identified Walter as a descendant of the 13th-century Comyns of Kilbride, stating that two men named Walter Comyn died in support of Edward Balliol in 1332 and 1335 (Dalrymple 1779: 146), which probably eliminates them from Richard's paternity. Recent scholarship supports Hailes's Kilbride branch identification, but also suggests that a later Walter Comyn may have continued at Rowallan until David II's time (Ravilious 2015), although this is uncertain. In Aberdeen, a Buchan family Cumming of Culter later claimed descent from another 13th-century Comyn ancestor, but are not visible in records until the later 15th century, and could well be descendants of Richard rather than the other way about.

Other Comyns are occasionally glimpsed in 14th-century records, though with no certainty of kinship to Richard. A David Comyn was noted as 'unius customariorum burgensis de Cupro [Fyff]' ('one of the most senior burgesses of Coupar [Fife]', *ER I*: 601) in 1359, and received safe conducts to England for business and trade in 1362 and 1365 with other merchants (*Rot Scot I*: 861, 897), at the same time that Richard received his

safe conducts from the English crown. This could be a sight of a possible brother, uncle or father – and a gentry-mercantile background for this Comyn family. A Thomas Comyn was recorded as a baillie of Perth in 1369 in a deed of the King James Hospital (HMC 1877: 714), a further Comyn connection with Perthshire and the Tay Firth. Comyn's associates the Leslies held land and a tower at Ballinbreich (Fife) overlooking the Tay. A plausible explanation of Richard Comyn's appearance in these circles is emergence from a Perth–Tay located family, gaining a place in the Angus household through local connections with the Leslies.

Another mid-14th-century Comyn was 'Richard Comyne, lord of Scrahisburgh' who witnessed a charter granting lands in Lanarkshire in around 1350.¹⁷ A co-witness was John Hessewell, whose lands in 'Teyvedale' (Teviotdale) were granted by Edward III of England to one of his Scottish supporters, Robert Colvill, in 1362 on the grounds that Hessewell's brother and heir Adam was 'adhering to our enemies' (*Rot Scot I*: 827). Edward also granted Colvill 'twenty pounds duly released in our name from the lands and tenancies which belonged to Richard Comyn, deceased, who held of us in chief in Screyseburgh of our gift' (ibid). Scraesburgh (Roxburghshire), the site of a medieval castle (Canmore ID 56842), was a Badenoch Comyn possession between 1200 and 1314, according to Young's mapping of Comyn lordships (Young 1997: xii, 84), but it and Teviotdale were English-occupied Borders territories through most of the 14th century. This older Richard Comyn appears to have been a Comyn following English allegiance. An order in the Close Rolls of Edward III, 1 March 1344, refers to four knights' fees 'which Richard Comyn and the heir of William Comyn hold' in Herefordshire (*CCR Edw. III* vol 7: 277). There is little to connect the three men named Richard Comyn, but, notably, the Richard of David II's time makes his first appearance in the record after David's return to Scotland in 1357. Perhaps David's circle during his captivity in England could have been a good place for a young valet at ease in both kingdoms to advance his prospects, and English Comyns

in the time of Edward III could reward fuller investigation.

DEATH AND SUCCESSION

The 1412 audience with Albany is the final record of Richard Comyn, alive. A sasine from William, Abbot of Dunfermline, in 1415 infefts Richard's son John with lands in Coupar-Maccultie (*Bamff Chrs*: 23 #9).¹⁸ David must already have received his share, as his descendants were to continue as feuars of Couttie until 1606. The old parish church of Bendochy (Canmore ID 30917) holds a memorial to the last Cumming possessor.

DISCUSSION: THE ORIGINS OF RICHARD COMYN

ARMORIAL EVIDENCE

Comyn is represented in the collection of Scottish arms in the late-14th-century Dutch Armorial of Gelre, and whether these arms represent Richard Comyn merits some discussion. Dunbar (1891) presented a colour facsimile of the Scottish arms

with a clear reading of 'Sir R Comyn' (Illus 5). However, Adam-Even's catalogue of the arms (1962: 72) and Popoff's definitive investigation of the identities of the arms bearers (2012: 279) read the caption as 'sijr a comijn'. The 'a' is likely intended as a preposition rather than an initial, as used in many of the other captions, including that for 'Sijr Wauter a leslij'. Examination of the modern digital facsimile helps little as, while 'Comijn' is reasonably clear, the claimed 'R' or 'a' is obscured by possible damage and not legible at all (Illus 5).¹⁹

The arms presented are the familiar three garbs or on Buchan azure, curiously within a double flowered tressure. Despite the field colour, Adam-Even identified the arms as 'Lord of Badenoch' – 'éteint au début du XIVe siècle' (Adam-Even 1962: 72n716) and Popoff repeated the identification, adding nothing new. The Armorial has been analysed as a composite work composed over several decades from around 1370 until the early 15th century (Pastoureau 2012: 13–14). The Gelre Herald's practice appears to have been to enter the arms of sovereigns first, leaving space to enter their vassals later. On this assumption, Galbreath (1932: 5, 68) used the



ILLUS 5 Arms for 'Sijr [?] Comijn' in the Armorial of Gelre (Netherlands, late 14th century): comparison of Dunbar's hand-drawn facsimile (1891, Plate III, left, courtesy of Society of Antiquaries of Scotland) with a contemporary digital facsimile (right, copyright and courtesy of KBR Royal Library of Belgium)

Bruce saltire on the mantle to identify the king of Scots' arms as those of David II (d 1371), but argued that all the other Scots arms dated from between 1382 and 1385, after the Stewart succession, proposing a French excursion to Scotland in 1385 as an opportunity for Gelre to collect his material. This was certainly a time when Richard Comyn, newly knighted, would have been visible in Scottish court circles or tournament parties.

The use of the double tressure is harder to explain, if the arms are Richard Comyn's, than for the later Thomas Cuming of Altyre, especially as a relatively early, non-regal use of the device. There is no recognised recent royal antecedent in Comyn's ancestry, although nothing is known of his maternal line. Double tressures were displayed on Comyn of Badenoch arms after the family's demise (such as BL Harley MS 4030 #217, dated 1605 × 1612) but there is no evidence that the tressure was used in John (III) Comyn's lifetime; thus it does not provide a basis for arguing Richard's descent from Comyn of Badenoch. The Comyn three garbs were used after 1382 to represent the earldom of Buchan, and the tressure could belong to Alexander Stewart, by then the earl. However, the Gelre arms are labelled 'Comijn' and set on the third page alongside other knights. The reason for indicating the double tressure on Comyn's arms remains obscure, but if they do represent Richard, the use of the Buchan blue field may provide an important clue.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF RICHARD COMYN AND MARGARET STEWART, COUNTESS OF ANGUS

Margaret's grant of land to Richard Comyn, discussed above, was made in April 1389, one day before Margaret was permitted by parliament to entail her personal titles and lands to her natural son George Douglas, following her deal with Robert Stewart, Earl of Fife. Boardman (2014: 52) saw the grant as reward for Comyn's role in setting up the confirmation of Margaret's settlement. Perhaps it was also encouraged by Fife to welcome Comyn into his employ as a man of business, of use in his northern alliance against his brother 'the Wolf'. Margaret's declaration of

kinship with Comyn is one of the few clues to Richard's ancestry, alongside the armorial evidence and his distinctive surname, but discovering likely relationships between them is hampered by the partial, at best, knowledge of their ancestry. Unless related through his unknown mother, Comyn does not appear to be part of the Abernethy-Leslie-Lindsay kinship network (Illus 4), not apparently related to his associate Walter Leslie at all.

Margaret's maternal ancestry is also unclear. Her mother, Margaret Sinclair, was the daughter (probably) of Sir William Sinclair of Roslyn, killed at the battle of Teba in Spain with Sir James Douglas in 1330 (*TSP VI*: 566–7). Margaret's Roslin Sinclair cousins including Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, were likely descended from Alexander Comyn, Earl of Buchan, through the earls of Strathearn via their mother, Isabella of Strathearn. If Richard Comyn was descended from one of Earl Alexander's sons, this could be a tentative identifier of kinship arising from illustrious ancestry and familial alliance. Margaret Sinclair's mother is unknown, leaving scope for Margaret of Angus and Comyn to have been related through lost ancestral lines, such as Sinclair maternal ancestry for Comyn or Margaret Sinclair having a Comyn maternal connection.

There is at least the possibility of a legitimate agnatic descent for Richard from Earl Alexander, who had four sons. Earl John had no children in his marriage, Alexander no sons, and William was a cleric. Less is known about the younger son Roger Comyn, sent by his father to serve Edward I of England 'against the Welsh' in 1282 (*CDS II*: #216). He may be the same Roger Comyn sent by Edward II to aid the defence of Dundee in 1311, and to deliver Gilbert of Glencharnie from Scottish captivity in 1314 (*Rot Scot I*: 109, 132), suggesting a life spent in service of the English king. In 1319, Edward granted Roger Comyn 10 marks 'in consideration of his good service, past and to come' (*CCR Edw. II* vol 3: 80), and he petitioned the king for further support in 1324, noting that he had lost his horse and armour at Bannockburn (*CDS III*: #856). Roger was elderly in 1324, but one intermediate generation

could bridge him and Richard Comyn. A later Roger Comyn of Bunshull received a three-year tax farm in Herefordshire in 1366 (*CCR Edw.III* vol 12: 281). The forename Roger is rare among Comyns, Buchan's son receiving it in respect of his maternal grandfather, Roger de Quincy, so the 1366 Roger could be a descendant. Tentative signs of connection between all the Herefordshire Comyns (see above) and Scotland could reward deeper investigation. A descent from the Buchan Comyns would be consistent with the use of Buchan blue in the Gelre arms, if they did represent Richard Comyn.

JOHN RIDDELL AND THE GORDON CUMMINGS

In 1821, the Gordon Cumming brothers Sir William, 2nd Baronet, and Charles Lennox began correspondence with the antiquarian, advocate and legal genealogist John Riddell (1785–1862). Riddell possessed a deep knowledge of documents in private hands around Scotland, his reputation opening up the charter chests of landed and powerful families to him, to the extent that 'he was said to have inspected the contents of almost every principal charter-chest in Scotland' (Ritchie 2004). Riddell discovered the grant to Richard Comyn in Kerrymore by Margaret of Angus, discussed above, transcribing it in a letter to Sir William Gordon Cumming in 1826, commenting:

The above is inserted among the MS collections of Father Hay, an eminent Antiquarian and gleaner of ancient documents, who lived more than a century ago – in the Advocates' Library (Cal Jac 5.2.17) f. 225. Unfortunately the reference is not given.²⁰

Very similar wording was reproduced in Grant's edition of Shaw's *History* published the following year (Grant 1827: 480n), indicating that Riddell was the source of the documents reproduced in the appendix, as well as much of the commentary accompanying them in Grant's footnotes. Riddell was consulted on the discovered Dunbar-Cumyng marriage contract of 1408, a few years

earlier in 1821. Riddell's letter reporting the discovery is not with the family papers today, though Stuart (1877: 687) and the Cummings' solicitors²¹ referred to it, and the excited letter between the two Cumming brothers discussing its implications has survived (see note 6 below).

Riddell returned to the Cumyng–Dunbar indenture in his 1826–7 letters to Cumming, revealing that the original document was found at Gordon Castle, the earls of Huntly 'having occasionally been proprietors of the Earldom of Murray, may account for their having [it]'.²² One particular comment by Riddell on the indenture is worth considering in detail (my italics):

I find by the Exchequer rolls that parts of the rents of Glencarney were drawn in 1456–8 & 1460, & most probably afterwards by Elizabeth Countess of Murray, and by the same authority that the whole property was set by the Crown, who thus became the proprietors, in consequence of the forfeiture of Douglas Earl of Murray, [to] 'Duncano Grant militi' in the year 1478, by whose family they were finally retained. Hence in consequence of this and other considerations I think it must be presumed that the part of Alexander Cumyn's marriage contract relative to that property was never implemented, *and that Alexander necessarily got the warrandice lands in Murray, or in other words the estate of Altyr*.²³

It is clear that Riddell had come to the conclusion being advanced in this paper that the 'barony of Altyre' was a creation of the 15th century, as a consequence of the marriage contract with the Dunbar earl, establishing his sister and her heirs with prime estate in Moray, close to his seat at Darnaway. This was not a view the Gordon Cummings were comfortable to promote in print. The New Edition of Shaw's *History of Moray* (Grant 1827) was produced with substantial support from the Gordon Cummings and the editor, local journalist and bookseller John Grant, printed transcripts of several of the documents brought to light by Riddell, along with verbatim and unattributed reproductions of Riddell's comments on them from his correspondence with Cumming. The above paragraph was reproduced almost exactly as the footnote to the transcript

of the indenture on page 475. Riddell's initial 'I find' becomes a vaguer 'We find', and a significant change was made to Riddell's last point on the identity of the lands Alexander Cumyne received (my italics):

and that Alexander Cumyne necessarily got the warrandice lands *within the Sheriffdom of Elgin and Forres which it is believed were those of Logie Sluie Presley Branchell and Craigmiln which the family still hold in feu from the Earl of Moray* (Grant 1827: 475n).

Any implication that Altyre was created as an estate at this point in time was removed, citing instead a number of places within it held at times by Gordon Cumming principal tenants, also surnamed Cumming, and deemed by Altyre to be its cadet branches. The Gordon Cummings were excited by the discovery of an older record of their history, but suppressed its implications that aspects of that history might be less antique than their tradition maintained.

A hint of what may have attracted the interest of the Cumming brothers is visible in Riddell's advice on how to persuade the reluctant Earl of Moray to open his charter room to them (my italics):

I would not hint any thing about the Randolphs or Dunbars Earls of Murray, *or your possible claim to represent the Family*. Perhaps you might add your wish also to know the succession in exact chronology, of the Dunbars Earls of Murray, but even this might give rise to suspicion.²⁴

The theme may have persisted, as Riddell found it necessary to point out more clearly:

Supposing Euphame to be the Earl's sister, she could not have been heir of line of the Earls of Murray, that character in law being in Alexander Dunbar of Frendraught, necessarily her brother, and his descendants.²⁵

In 1827, Cumming worked on a petition for elevation to the peerage (discussed in Part 1), initially drafting a letter to the newly appointed

prime minister George Canning in April that year. Canning's wife was a distant relative of the Gordon Cummings, but relations had been complicated by their father's successful case in the House of Lords (1800) against Canning's sister-in-law, the Duchess of Portland, over the inheritance of the Gordonstoun estate. This had been entailed to Alexander Penrose Cumming, who won his case in spite of Portland's position as a nearer heir of line. William Gordon Cumming may have considered himself on better terms with the Portlands-Cannings but with Canning's illness and untimely death in August, the letter was held back and later redrafted, addressed 'To be left with Lord Goderich or (eventually) with his Successor'.²⁶ Goderich's administration was already on its way out and there is no evidence of its being received by the government that followed. The Cumming brothers were among the government's Scottish supporters in parliament in its political battle against parliamentary reform, and in the midst of this they continued to entertain hopes of elevation and political preferment, selectively employing their genealogical discoveries as fitting this aim.

REVISIONIST THEORIES ON THE ORIGINS OF THE ALTYRE CUMMINGS

Riddell's case work and investigations were catalogued after his death (Maidment 1863) and published during his life, but his work on the Cummings of Altyre was not – despite significant findings for documenting the history of the family. He identified Sir Richard Comyn as a key figure visible in public records already calendared by the 1820s in addition to Margaret Stewart's charter, and also identified another Alexander Comyn witnessing an instrument of the bishop of Moray in 1375.²⁷ This is unlikely to be Alexander of the marriage indenture (or if it was, then additional generations would likely be required between him and the 1456 Thomas of Altyre), but Riddell was quick to propose this Alexander as brother to Richard. This was a leap of faith based on the likely age of the individuals and Moray connections (in Richard's case, just the briefly held 'Develly' and Darnaway

forestry rights), Riddell then being unaware of Richard's stronger connections to Perthshire and Angus. However, the 1375 Alexander could be taken as evidence of continuity of Comyn involvement with Moray through the 14th century, which, alongside the name shared with the 1408 Alexander, fitted the theory of Altyre origins Riddell was constructing.

Aware of the tradition of descent from the assassinated Robert Comyn, Riddell set out his counter-theory to Cumming in a letter of December 1826:

I am well aware we cannot at present fix the descent of Altyr from Badenagh, but may not the following authorities rather preponderate in favor of a different one than what is assigned in Douglasses' Baronage?

Sir Alexander Cumin knight, proved by Ragman Roll to have sworn fealty to Ed. the first 'apud Elgin in Moravia', 26 July 1296. This I take to be the same with 'Alexander Cumin of Badenagh' the husband of Eva, mentioned in Rymer's *Fœdera* 4 Sept 1296, vol 2. It is to be observed that the head of the House of Badenagh then was John Cumin, and he [Alexander] like other younger sons, by a frequent practice with us is called of Badenagh to distinguish him from other Alexander Cumins, one of whom was a younger son of the Cumins Earls of Buchan. Then may come the Alexander in 1375 in the Chartulary of Murray probably a brother of Sir Richard. There may have been one or two generations more, but the residence of the first Alexander apparently in Murray, and the adoption of his surname by the others rather indicate him to be their ancestor.²⁸

This alternative line of ancestry may have chimed with some members of the Cumming family. Middleton's romantic ballad *Alastair Bhan Comyn* (1889) is based on legends of 14th-century feuding between Comyns and the Randolph earls in the 1320s to 1330s. A Comyn fortress near the River Findhorn supposedly held by an elderly patriarch, Alexander Comyn, was under siege by Randolph's men. Alastair Bhan his son led the resistance to Randolph outside the siege, winning renown for escaping from Randolph's soldiers by leaping across rocks on the Findhorn,

at a crossing still known today as Randolph's Leap (even though in this version it was a Comyn who did the leaping). Middleton received an account of the legend via her mother from Richard Rose, minister of Drainie (Moray), in 1830 and a chain of Gaelic storytellers before him. Although it is legendary storytelling, the elderly Alexander Comyn could be identified with the younger son of John (I) Comyn of Badenoch cited by Riddell. It is plausible that this Alexander held land in Moray of his father and later his brother, and unlike the even younger brother Robert claimed as the Altyre ancestor, he is known to have married.²⁹ He is not recorded as having been killed at Bannockburn or disinherited, so he may have kept his Moray landholdings and passed them in some form to descendants. The Alexanders Comyn of 1375 and 1408, if descended from him, bore a name familiar to the Cummings of Moray down to the present day. Relations with the Randolphs were unlikely to have been warm, although the more lurid details of the tale seem improbable without having left greater echoes in the historical record.³⁰

This revisionist approach to their origins seemed to find some initial accord with Altyre. In an early draft of Cumming's petition for the peerage, unaddressed and undated, but noting Canning's death so probably drafted shortly after, Cumming's advocate wrote (my italics):

his family have for five Centuries (& as he believes very justly) had the universal *repute of a lineal descent from Alexander Comyn of Badenoch, son of Black John Comyn* & Uncle to John Comyn who was stabbed by Robert Bruce ... The clan, till then the most powerful in Scotland, declined, but the chiefship descended in the line of Alexander.³¹

Riddell's proposal appears logical and reasonable, leaving much of the Badenoch Comyn descent claim intact; but it did not incorporate all aspects of the official story, not least the dramatic traditions surrounding the assassination at Dumfries and loss of dynastic status. By the end of 1827, Grant's *History* had reasserted the Robert ancestry story in print as established fact, and Cumming removed his reference to

Alexander as ancestor from the next draft of his peerage petition.

RIDDELL ON SIR RICHARD COMYN

Riddell turned his attention to what the expression of kinship by Margaret Stewart of Angus towards Richard Comyn signified. As he had noted, the grant was found among charters collected by the antiquary 'Father' Richard Hay (1661–1736). Riddell noted that the charters immediately before and after Comyn's involved members of the Sinclair families of Rosslyn and Herdmanston, 'with which families indeed Father Hay was connected & well acquainted'.³² Riddell developed a complex argument, noting that Margaret's mother was a Sinclair (of Rosslyn) who married a Sinclair of Herdmanston as her second husband, after the death of Angus in David II's captivity. Margaret's younger half-brothers were the Herdmanston heirs, while she was also Sinclair on her maternal side. Riddell noted also a Banffshire Sinclair landholder, Richard Sinclair of Fynlater and Deskfurd (and a maternal first cousin to Margaret of Angus), drawing as a conclusion:

When it is recollected that any descendants of the Sinclairs of Hermanston through her mother would be also 'cousins' of Margaret Countess of Angus & Marr, at the same time that Richard Cumin is so designed, bore the same Christian name with Richard Sinclair of Finletter, & that the marriage contract of Alexander his son [sic] is dated at Finletter we may be led to infer that this was the channel through which Sir Richard was connected with the Countess perhaps his mother being a Sinclair.³³

At this stage of his enquiry Riddell presumed that Alexander of the Dunbar marriage was Richard Comyn's son, a view he would later reject, but he had spotted something interesting in the marriage contract having been concluded at Findlater. The latter was still in Sinclair possession in 1408 and would be until 1437. It is probably not possible to ascertain whether Richard Comyn was a Sinclair on his maternal side, but it could offer a more satisfactory explanation of Margaret's address

to him as 'beloved kinsman' than more remote common ancestry in Earl Alexander. While Richard Sinclair was a contemporary of Richard Comyn and so not the source of the latter's name, the name could have been acquired via a putative Sinclair maternal descent, explaining the appearance of this rather rarer name among more commonly encountered Comyn Alexanders, Johns, Williams and Roberts.

RIDDELL ON CONNECTIONS IN ROSS

Riddell had one more revelation for the Gordon Cummings, that would further shape his revisionist account of their genealogy. Aware of the connections between Richard Comyn and Ross, Riddell identified three 15th-century land records in Ross in the charter chest of Oliphant of Condie.³⁴ The lands concerned were 'Logy' and 'Inchmane', which look likely to be Logie Easter near Tain and Inchvannie near Strathpeffer (Ross and Cromarty). The first was a confirmation from Jan 1412/13 in the name of Euphemia, Countess of Ross (Walter Leslie's granddaughter) to David Comyn, son of Sir Richard Comyn, which lands 'the said lord Richard had inherited'. This is useful new information, but what especially interested Riddell were the named heirs should David's entailed male-line succession fail, namely his brother John, known from the Coupar-Maccultie charters, and 'Alexandro Comyne consanguineo dicti David et heredibus suis masculis de corpore suo legitime' ('Alexander Comyne kinsman of the said David and the legitimate heirs male of his body') before 'heredibus predicti Ricardi quibuscuncquibus' ('to the heirs of the foresaid Richard whom-ever'). Riddell equated this Alexander with that of the Cumyne–Dunbar marriage, four years earlier, noting that because Comyn was entailing his Ross estates to male-line succession, he must have regarded Alexander as the next heir male after his own sons.³⁵ The other two documents were a charter and sasine of 1431 by which John Cumyn transferred the same lands to Sir David Stewart of Durisdeer, naming John as the son of Richard Cumyn of 'Cowpm^ulti', confirming them as the very same Perthshire family.

Reasoning how Richard and Alexander Comyn were kinsmen leads to two similar scenarios, as with the similar issue for Margaret of Angus and Richard, with the added element that Richard believed there to be a male-line path of heirship between them. This could be owing to shared membership of a Comyn family that had survived in Moray, Ross or Perthshire. If Richard was, as hypothesised, a descendant of a son of the Comyn earl of Buchan, then Alexander could also be descended in similar way. It is curious that Richard did not include Alexander among the heirs of his Perthshire properties in 1404, suggesting that Alexander did not have an association with that part of the country – or perhaps that Richard only became aware of him later. Another explanation could lie in more distant descent from earlier Comyn ancestors. If Richard was the last male-line descendant of the Buchan Comyns (or, indeed, the Kilbride Comyns), and Alexander was a genuine male-line descendant of the Comyns of Badenoch, then that would make him an heir male of Richard, contemporary memory easily able to account for the genealogy. In the event, Richard's line did not fail, and Alexander's appears to have established itself as Cumming of Altyre, so the issue required no further legal examination.

Riddell also cited the 17th-century manuscript history of the Mackintoshes discussed above and the 15th-century feud it recounted with Alexander Cumine (*Gen Coll*, 1900). In the absence of other evidence, this supported Riddell's image of Alexander emerging as a powerful local figure in the Moray of the time, setting up his heirs with estates and membership of the earl's kinship network. Riddell ended his correspondence with the strange invocation to

keep the knowledge of these repositories as secret as possible, for in the highlands, where after all, there are few ancient deeds, such channels are invaluable, & need not be exposed to all vulgar eyes. ... Thus at length we are obtaining evidence proving that after the downfall of the principal line, there existed one branch of the Cumins, great, & affluent, though it must be confessed that as in most other cases, truth has here lain in the bottom of a well.³⁶

And as it would continue to, for some time to come. Altyre would prove willing to incorporate Riddell's discoveries of lost records when they supported the 'official story' recounted by Douglas and Grant, and soon to be elaborated further by family members Mary Cumming-Bruce and Lady Middleton. But it was less receptive to Riddell's revisionism that challenged the tradition of direct descent from Richard Comyn or the assassinated Robert, despite Riddell's re-imagining of their 14th–15th-century ancestry permitting a more coherent picture of its origins to emerge.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of two centuries from the middle of the 18th, the Cummings of Altyre engaged with antiquaries, historians and genealogists, some emerging from within the family, in collaboratively constructing and polishing an approved version of the family's history. It is rather ironic that one of the sharpest and most critical contributions was left somewhat shrouded – or even, indeed, lying at the bottom of John Riddell's well.

Riddell's work for Altyre was not eclipsed in the sense that the documents he uncovered in his quest were proclaimed and celebrated – at least, when they were compatible with the 'official story'. Less congruent aspects were left in the shade, and in the current age of easily replicable information, it is the less critical or accurate versions of Douglas, Grant and Cumming-Bruce that continue to be put forward as the 'true' history of the Cummings of Altyre. Richard Comyn – the late-14th-century Cumming for whom the most historical evidence survives – is still presented as a direct ancestor in work published today, despite Riddell finding in the Oliphant deeds that he was a collateral relative of the 15th-century Alexander, at best. Yet Riddell offered a plausible narrative of Comyn continuity in Moray through the Randolph period until the family made its peace with Randolph's Dunbar successors, via descent from Sir Alexander Comyn, another uncle to John the Red Comyn,

and a possible kernel of truth at the heart of the Alastair Bhan legend. The Altyre founder may have been a grandson or great-grandson, inheriting the same name Alexander, perhaps beginning life as a cateran of Alexander Stewart the younger in the latter's tearaway youth, before following him into service as Earl of Mar. Later, taking advantage of the renown and connections achieved by a distant relative, along with his own ability as effective local strongman and fixer, he was able to gain entry to the ranks of Scottish nobility through an effective marriage and the acquisition of a good estate for his descendants.

While lacking the narrative of wrongful deprivation of power and eminence that accompanied the tale of descent from the assassinated Robert, it offers an equally plausible line of descent from the Comyns of Badenoch, and a meaningful claim to be their representatives. Of course, other explanations remain possible and need to be considered alongside. What can be said is that Altyre was certainly in Cumming hands by 1456, and possibly a decade or two earlier; that they probably descend from Alexander whose marriage into the Dunbars secured his descendants' prosperity; and that Richard Comyn was not a direct ancestor of the modern Cumming family, but likely was a relative of some degree and may have supported Alexander in his suit to marry Euphemia Dunbar. Before Richard's time is a half-century that cannot be satisfactorily filled, but evidently one or two Comyn families survived the dynasty's loss of status by building useful connections with Leslies, perhaps Sinclairs, and branches of Stewarts, that fostered a return to the limelight. Further research into Comyns holding English lands after 1306 may help to bridge this gap.

Supplementary material: transcriptions of key resources available at <https://doi.org/10.9750/PSAS.152.1371>

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NOTES

- 1 NLS Dep.175/1/6.
- 2 NLS Dep.175/1/7.
- 3 Inventory of Title Deeds in Altyre Charter Room, typescript, NLS Dep.175.
- 4 NLS Dep.175/1/22.
- 5 NRS GD44/13/10/1, Indenture betwixt Thomas Dunbar earl of Moray and Alexander Cumyne, 28 May 1408.
- 6 NLS Dep.175/160/3, Charles Lennox Cumming-Bruce to Sir William Gordon Cumming, 15 May 1821.
- 7 NRS GD44/13/10/1.
- 8 NRAS 3094/71.
- 9 NRS GD 297/229, Transumpt (1485) of charter by Walter Leslie, Lord of Ross, to Hugh Ross of Kynfaunis of lands in Caithness; 26 November 1380, Tain, Ross.
- 10 Aberdeen-Banff III IV: 83–4. Charter issued by Walter Lesley to Andrew Mercer, 18 August 1381, Elgin.
- 11 NRS GD158/219, Indenture between Margaret countess of Mar and Angus and her kinsman Sir Richard Cumine granting lands in barony of Kerrymore, 8 April 1389, Edinburgh.
- 12 NLS Acc.6206/2, Inquisition for Alexander Moray of Colbyn at Aberdeen, 5 February 1396/7.

- 13 NRS GD220/6/1803, Charter by Robert, duke of Albany, earl of Fyfe and Mentethe to William Olifaunte.
- 14 NRS GD297/195, Instrument narrating that Richard Comyn, attorney for Walter Ross by letters from chancery, compeared in presence of Robert, duke of Albany, governor of Scotland, 21 June 1412.
- 15 NRS GD1/93/1, Charter by John, abbot of Dunfermline, of lands at Coupar-Maccultie, Perthshire, to Sir Richard Cummin, 2 November 1394.
- 16 NRS GD1/93/2, Charter upon resignation by John, abbot of Dunfermline, of lands at Coupar-Maccultie, Perthshire, to Sir Richard Cumyne, and his heirs male, 20 February 1403/4. Translation by NRS.
- 17 NRS GD40/3/373, Charter by Isabella of Newbiggyng to John of Aynesley of lands in Newbiggyng [Lanarkshire], c. 1350.
- 18 NRS GD83/9.
- 19 KBR ms. 15652–56, digital facsimile, <https://uurl.kbr.be/1733715>: image 135 #11.
- 20 NLS Dep.175/162/6, John Riddell to Sir William Gordon Cumming (hereafter, ‘Riddell Corr’), 5 December 1826.
- 21 NLS Dep.175/163/1, James Chalmers (solicitor, London) to Sir William Gordon Cumming anent Charters &c., 28 Nov 1825.
- 22 Riddell Corr, 5 December 1826.
- 23 Riddell Corr, 5 December 1826.
- 24 Riddell Corr, 16 December 1826.
- 25 Riddell Corr, 4 August 1829.
- 26 NLS Dep.175/64/1, Sir William Gordon Cumming to Viscount Goderich, prime minister (draft), 28 December 1827.
- 27 Riddell Corr, 16 December 1826.
- 28 Riddell Corr, 16 December 1826.
- 29 Petition of Eva, wife of Sir Alexander Comyn of Badenaghe, captured at Dunbar, 1296, to King Edward (Stevenson, Docs: 93).
- 30 In Richard Rose’s version, Alastair Bāne and his compadres were sealed in a cave by Randolph’s men and asphyxiated by fire, their corpses decapitated and the heads hurled into Alexander’s fortress as human cannonballs. Rose identified the Comyn fortress as Dunphail Castle (Canmore ID

15758) and related how his grandfather had witnessed a mound opened there to reveal ‘five or six skeletons in rude constructed stone chests. The skeletons fresher than might have been expected, but not a vestige of a skull or head on any one of them.’ NLS Dep.175/64/1.

- 31 NLS Dep.175/162/6, Sir William Gordon Cumming, draft letter, undated [1827].
- 32 Riddell Corr, 5 December 1826.
- 33 Riddell Corr, 5 December 1826.
- 34 NLS Dep.175/110/8, Transcript of three charters [1412, 1431] from the originals in possession of Mr Oliphant of Condie, made in 1829.
- 35 Riddell Corr, 3 September 1828.
- 36 Riddell Corr, 17 November 1828.

ABBREVIATIONS

BL: British Library
 KBR: Royal Library of Belgium
 NLS: National Library of Scotland
 NRAS: National Register of Archives (Scotland)
 NRS: National Records of Scotland
Aberdeen-Banff III: Illustrations of the topography and antiquities of the shires of Aberdeen and Banff
Bamff Chrs: Bamff Charters A.D. 1232–1703
CCR Edw.II: Calendar of the close rolls preserved in the Public Record Office. Edward II
CCR Edw.III: Calendar of the close rolls preserved in the Public Record Office. Edward III
CDS: Calendar of documents relating to Scotland
ER: Rotuli scaccarii regum Scotorum: The Exchequer rolls of Scotland
Gen Coll: Genealogical collections concerning families in Scotland
 Laing, *Seals: Descriptive Catalogue of Impressions from Ancient Scottish Seals*
Moray Reg: Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis
RMS: Registrum magni sigilli regum Scotorum
 Stevenson, *Docs: Documents illustrative of the history of Scotland 1286–1306*
TSP: The Scots Peerage

REFERENCES

DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

BL: British Library

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KBR: Royal Library of Belgium

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NLS: National Library of Scotland Special Collections

Dep.175 Gordon Cumming of Altyre & Gordonstoun.

Acc.6206 John Horne Stevenson KC documents.

NRAS: National Register of Archives (Scotland)

3094 Dunbar of Westfield.

NRS: National Records of Scotland

GD1/93 Cuparmaculty titles, regality of Dunfermline.

GD40 Papers of the Kerr Family, Marquises of Lothian (Lothian Muniments).

GD44 Papers of the Gordon Family, Dukes of Gordon (Gordon Castle Muniments).

GD83 Papers of the Ramsay Family of Bamff, Perthshire.

GD158 Papers of the family of Hume of Polwarth, Berwickshire, Earls of Marchmont.

GD220 Papers of the Graham Family, Dukes of Montrose (Montrose Muniments).

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