

IV.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE ABERACH-MACKAY BANNER, NOW EXHIBITED
IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM. BY REV. A. MACKAY, WESTERDALE
MANSE, HALKIRK.

The earliest reference to the Aberach-Mackay Banner of which we have any knowledge, meantime, is in the article on Tongue parish in the *First Statistical Account*, written about 1792 by the Rev. Wm. Mackenzie, and is as follows:—

“There is a cave in the rock upon which the Castle [Varrich, near Tongue] is built called *Leabuidh Evin Abaruich*, *i.e.* John of Lochaber’s bed, whither he is said to have retired in times of danger. A family of Mackays is descended from him, and are reported still to have in their possession his banner, with the motto wrought in golden letters, *Biodh treun—Biodh treun*, *i.e.* Be valiant.”

The writer of this article was inducted minister of Tongue in 1769, and laboured in that parish till his death in 1834; but before his settlement at Tongue he was minister at Achness on Strathnaver from 1766 to 1769, as we are informed by his descendant, James Macdonald, Esq., W.S., Edinburgh. His long and intimate acquaintance with the Mackays both on Strathnaver—where he had a daughter married and settled—and at Tongue, Lord Reay’s seat, coupled with his taste for family lore, as we gather from Sage’s *Memorabilia Domestica*, give considerable weight to his passing reference to the Aberach-Mackay banner. When he says that the banner of John Aberach was then reported to be in the possession of his descendants, he was but relating what was traditionally believed during the latter half of the 18th century, *viz.*, that this banner was the battle-flag of John Aberach, who led the Mackays at the battle of Druim-nan-Coup in 1433 and became the progenitor of the Aberach-Mackays. The banner has occasioned a Gaelic proverb known throughout the north of Sutherland, and in daily use among Strathnaver people at the present day. When a Strathnaver man would express in Gaelic the idea conveyed in the English saying “as old as the hills,” he invariably uses the phrase *cho seann ri bratach*

nan Abrach (as old as the Aberach banner). The banner which is shown to be very old by this Gaelic proverb, is made to date from the earlier half of the 15th century in the tradition recorded by the Rev. Wm. Mackenzie; while both proverb and tradition agree in saying that it was the flag of the Aberach-Mackays.

In the *House and Clan of Mackay*, published in 1829, the historian relates¹ that the Aberach "family-colours" were then in the possession of an Aberach, residing at Thurso, called by the Highlanders *Hutcheon na Brataich* (Hugh of the banner). Both in the body of the book and in the genealogical account, he shows that this Hugh was the lineal descendant of Neil Williamson Mackay, who was killed at Thurso in 1649. He also states that the said Neil obtained possession of the said family colours, which rightfully pertained to his uncle Murdo Mackay, the Aberach chieftain, and that in consequence of this act of usurpation, bad feeling was engendered between uncle and nephew, but that Neil and his descendants continued to retain the banner henceforward. From this it appears that the banner descended lineally from father to son, and was always possessed by the Aberach chieftain for the time being until shortly before 1649, when it passed into the possession of Neil Mackay. This also agrees with traditions among Strathnaver people at the present day.

We offer the following explanation of the transference of the banner from the family of Murdo the chieftain to that of Neil his nephew. The Reay family and its adherents supported the falling cause of Charles I. and Charles II., while the Sutherland family and its adherents adopted the opposite and winning side. As a result of this unfortunate and fatal policy, the estate of Donald, Lord Reay, became so impoverished that the lands of Strathnaver and others were appressed for debt, and charters over them were obtained by adherents of the house of Sutherland. But the Aberach-Mackays, who claimed the upper half of Strathnaver as theirs in virtue of the grant² obtained by their progenitor

¹ *History of the House and Clan of Mackay*, p. 288.

² Vide *Earldom of Sutherland*, p. 66.

from his elder brother Neil Vass about 1437, energetically resisted the filching of what they considered their property. In this struggle Neil Mackay, nephew of the chieftain, was the leading spirit so long as he lived, and after his fall in 1649, the conflict was continued by his sons.¹ In these circumstances it was but natural that Neil and his sons should possess themselves of the banner, as they were the virtual leaders of the Aberach-Mackays. But it is also quite likely that this caused some friction between them and the family of the chieftain.

The writer of this paper was born and brought up at the foot of Strathnaver, was intimately acquainted with old people who had been driven from the heights of the Strath in consequence of the "Sutherland clearances" in the second decade of last century, and was frequently an interested auditor of their tales and traditions. Many of them never read the *History of the House and Clan of Mackay*, but they were unanimous in saying that the Aberachs had a banner, and that this banner was safely preserved at Thurso during the seventies of last century. Of this they had no doubt at all. To one of these old people, William Mackay, army pensioner, Dalcharn, Bettyhill, we must make more particular reference.

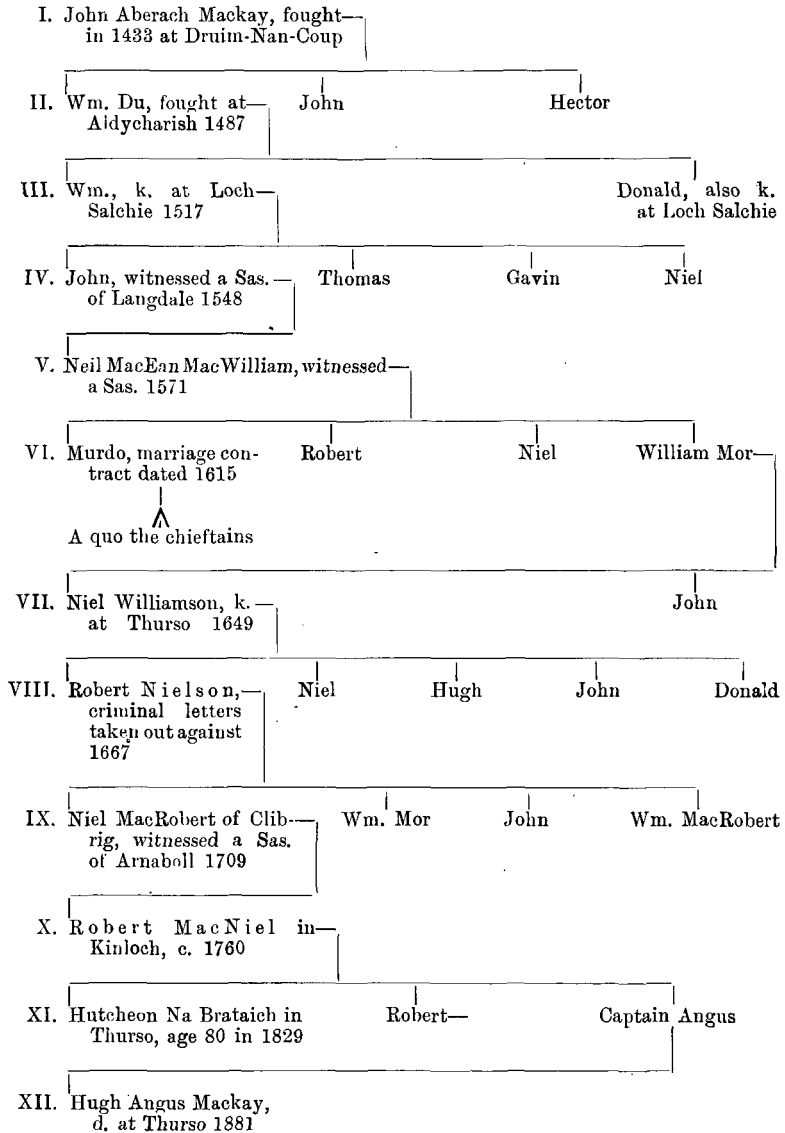
William Mackay was born in Strathnaver in 1797, joined the 78th or Ross-shire Highlanders in 1823, and after an army service of twenty-two years, settled at Dalcharn in 1845, where he died in 1893. Donald Mackay, father of the said William, married as his first wife Ann Mackay, sister of *Hutcheon na Brataich*, but William was a child of Donald's second marriage. As William the pensioner was a near neighbour of ours, we knew him intimately; and he often used to tell us that for two years before he joined the army he resided at Whitefield, near Thurso, with his kinsman, commissary Donald Macleod, a first cousin of *Hutcheon na Brataich*. During these years, between 1821 and 1823, *Hutcheon na Brataich* was a welcome and honoured visitor at Whitefield, and William, as he told us, saw the banner at different times. In 1842

¹ For further particulars of this struggle see our Genealogical Account of the Aberach-Mackays in *The Book of Mackay*.

William returned home on furlough, called at Thurso by the way, and was again shown the banner by Hugh Angus Mackay, nephew of *Hutcheon na Brataich*, in whose possession it then was. When in 1881 Hugh Angus, the said nephew, died at Thurso unmarried, William the pensioner was very anxious to secure the banner and solicited our help to this end, but it passed shortly afterwards into the possession of Alexander Mackay, assessor for the county of Caithness. The assessor died at Thurso, 15th January 1895, leaving no issue, and towards the close of 1897 the administrators of his estate handed the banner over into the custody of the Clan Mackay Society, who in turn deposited it for preservation in the Edinburgh Antiquarian Museum, where it now rests.

The Rev. Wm. Mackenzie, writing in 1792 from information gathered no doubt when he laboured at Achness between 1766 and 1769, gave his testimony as already quoted. We are thus warranted in concluding that the banner was treasured by the Aberachs about the middle of the eighteenth century as the genuine flag of John Aberach, and dating back to the first half of the fifteenth century. In 1829 the historian of the *House and Clan of Mackay* states that this banner was then in the possession of *Hutcheon na Brataich* at Thurso, and in more recent times the testimony of William the pensioner links us back to that of the historian. Among other traditions William the pensioner told us that this banner was carried, and nearly lost, by the Aberachs in a fierce encounter which they had on Strathnaver with the *Sìochd Ean Ruaidh*, another family of the Clan Mackay. This we take to be the battle above Syre, to which Sir Robert Gordon refers in his *Earldom of Sutherland*; and as it was in revenge of the slaughter of William Beg Mackay, killed at Durness about 1579, it must have happened in that or in the following year. If this tradition be genuine, it carries us back to the chieftain Neil Mac-Ean Mac-William, grandfather of Neil who was killed at Thurso, and great-great-grandson of John Aberach. We shall now give a key pedigree of the possessors of the Aberach-Mackay banner from the progenitor of the family downwards.

KEY PEDIGREE OF THE POSSESSORS OF THE ABERACH BANNER.



The banner is of white silk—hence the name *Bratach Bhan* (white banner) by which it is sometimes known—and is in a tattered condition. It is very evidently a fragment of its former self. Its length is only about 36 inches, and its breadth about 20 inches—a size far too small for a battle flag. It will be observed that the shield and crest are not now correctly related to the hoist, or leather strip, sewn along what is shown as the top of the flag in the reproduction from a photograph given in fig. 1. As related to the hoist, the shield now lies unnaturally on its side instead of facing it, and the lion rampant which it carries is made to appear as a lion passant. Evidently the leather hoist had become detached when the flag got tattered, and was then by misadventure sewn to the wrong side. If we imagine the hoist attached to what is shown as the left side of the flag in fig. 1, the shield and crest will appear correctly placed; the flag will be 36 inches broad, or, allowing for frayed margins, perhaps 38 inches; while its length may have extended to 60 or 70 inches. Sir J. Balfour Paul, Lyon King of Arms, in a letter dated 14th March 1899, writes:—

“If it is a banner, the principal armorial charge on it is represented in an unusual manner, as it does not face the hoist of the flag, which is the usual practice, but the bottom of it.”

We think we have explained how it came to present this unusual, and unnatural, appearance. He proceeds:—

“The charge referred to is evidently intended for a lion rampant; round the lion, at some distance from it and following the shape of a shield, have been at one time two thin lines representing, in my opinion, the outer and inner members of a double tressure. On the top horizontal line of this tressure, and projecting outwards from it, are five ornamental floreated objects, the centre one of which has a corresponding projection on the inner side of the tressure; in the middle of the vertical line down each side at the bends where the base begins to converge to a peak, and at the peak itself, there are similar objects all projecting both on the outer and inner sides of the tressure. What these objects are intended to represent is difficult to decide definitely: some of them might possibly be classed as thistles, some as fleur-de-lys, but none of them possess such characteristics as would enable one to put them down distinctly as one or the other. . . . The whole flag is evidently the work of some one unacquainted with the principles of heraldic design.”

The design is rudely executed, as may be seen by an examination of fig. 1, and the Lyon King is guarded in expressing his opinion, as becomes one occupying his high office, but we venture to think that what he states so guardedly is an undoubted fact. The shield is traced out by the two lines of the double tressure, surrounded by thistles and fleur-



Fig. 1. The Aberach Mackay Banner. (From a photograph.)

de-lys, and carries the lion rampant. The heraldic significance of the double tressure and fleur-de-lys is royal descent. This is shown by the following extract of grant¹ by King George I. to the Earl of Sutherland, dated 14th July 1718:—

¹ Vide *Sutherland Book*, vol. iii. p. 220.

“George R. Whereas it has been humbly represented to us that our right trusty and well-beloved cousin John, Earl of Sutherland, is lineally descended from William, Earl of Sutherland, and Lady Margaret Bruce, second daughter to Robert the First, King of Scotland . . . therefore . . . and in consideration of the nobleness of his blood, as being descended not only from the ancient thanes and Earls of Sutherland, but from the royal family of Scotland, as is aforesaid, we hereby authorise and order our Lyon King at Arms . . . to add to the paternal coat of arms of the said John, Earl of Sutherland, the double tressure circonfleurdelize.”

It is now well known that the only son of the marriage between William, Earl of Sutherland, and Lady Margaret Bruce, died unmarried, and that the family of Sutherland is descended of the second wife, Joanna Menteith. But into this matter we need not go further. We have shown in our genealogical account of the Aberach-Mackays that John Aberach was a son of Angus Du Mackay by his second wife, a daughter of Alexander Macdonald of Keppoch, and a great-granddaughter of King Robert II. It was probably because of this royal descent that John Aberach put such a charge upon his banner. The sons of Angus Du Mackay, although natives of the then rude north of Scotland, were not wholly unacquainted with the heraldry of that period. Niel, the eldest son of Angus Du Mackay by his first marriage, was for ten years in the south a hostage of the king, and spent some of that time on the Bass Rock, while John Aberach is said to have been fostered in Lochaber, and may have sojourned at the semi-royal court of his kinsman the Lord of the Isles. However rudely the designs on the banner may be executed, the son of Angus Du had some knowledge of heraldry, and gave expression to what he thought he was entitled to on this flag.

Let the reader look again at the flag as represented in fig. 1, and it will be seen that there is a crest above the shield. The execution is crude, but the representation is meant for “a hand erased” with the fingers extended. Round the hand runs the legend, “Verkvisly and tent to ye end.” Across the palm of the hand are the Gaelic words, *Be tren* (Be valiant), as the Rev. William Mackenzie recorded about 1792 in his account of the parish of Tongue. John Mackay of Herrer-

dale, author of *An Old Scots Brigade*, etc., states in the *Celtic Monthly* of June 1893 that Hugh Angus Mackay, the last Aberach hereditary bannerman, told him that his father alway understood and read the words on the palm of the hand as *Bidh tren* (Be valiant). Of course Mr Mackay wrote these words adopting the modern Gaelic spelling. The final letter *n* of *tren* is not well-formed, and this has led some modern students to read it *treu* (true), but it was intended for *tren* (valiant), and so understood by the Aberach-Mackays.

As is well known among Strathnaver people, *Be tren* (Be valiant) is the slogan of Mackay, which became Latinised into *manu forti*, the motto of Mackay since the family was dignified. Indeed, it seems to us that the old Gaelic motto is neater and pithier than the modern Latin one. The *manu* with a hand seems to us superfluous, while the word *forti* adequately expresses the idea of "be valiant."

As this was not the banner of the principal family of Mackay, now represented by the Lords of Reay, but of the Aberach-Mackays who were the oldest cadet line of that family, we naturally expect to find some difference between the arms of the principal family and that of the cadet. The armorial bearings of Donald, first Lord Reay, were as follows:—

Arms.—Azure on a cheveron, or, between three bear's heads, coupéd, argent, muzzled, gules, a roebuck's head, erased, between two hands holding daggers, all proper.

Crest.—A right hand holding up a dagger, pailways, proper:

Motto.—Manu forti.

Supporters.—Two men in military habits with muskets, in a sentinel posture, proper.

Before this family was dignified in the person of Donald, first Lord Reay, who was created Lord Rae 20th June 1628, the arms were "argent over three mullets, azure, a hand naked, proper." Sir J. Balfour Paul, Lyon King, in a letter dated 6th November 1899, writes:—

"I am much obliged by the Rev. A. Mackay pointing out the entry in Sir James Balfour of the arms of 'Mackay of Strathnaver 1503,' as consisting of 'argent over three mullets azure, a hand naked proper.' This is given im-

mediately before 'Mackay of Strathnavern now Lord Reay,' who is assigned the present arms of the Baron. The presumption is that they altered their arms on the creation of the Peerage, and this view is rather supported by Nisbet, who, in giving the arms, says that 'since that family was dignified' their achievement was, etc."

That is to say, according to the Balfour MS., the crest of Mackay of Strathnavern in 1503 was "a hand naked" without a dagger, just as is represented on the banner. But such a charge is also found on at least two Mackay tombstones known to us. Fig. 2 is a representation of the

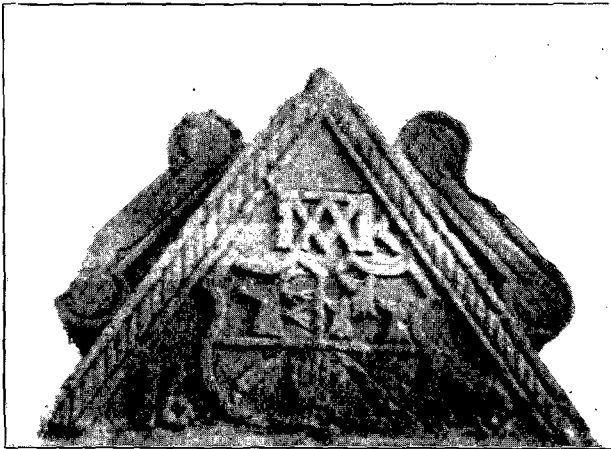


Fig. 2. Stone with armorial bearings at Kirkton, Strathhalladale.

Kirkton (Strathhalladale) stone. It bears the initials, A. M. K., of Angus Mackay, second of Bighouse; and the date 1630 indicates that it was erected over the tomb of his first wife, Jane Elphingstone, niece of Lord Elphingstone, who died in that year. The stone was found in 1894 among the ruins of Kirkton Chapel, and is now fixed on the pillar of the cemetery gate. The shield is peculiarly divided into two halves by a horizontal line. Above the horizontal line, and in the dexter division, there is a roebuck's head pierced by an arrow, exactly similar to the emblem to be seen on the Tongue stone (fig. 4). In the sinister

division there are three bear's heads. Below the horizontal bar there is a "hand," with fingers extended, resembling the crest on the banner, and flanked by what appears to be two blades. These flanking daggers may indicate the transition from a "naked hand" to a "hand holding a dagger," for it was shortly before this that Donald Mackay was created Lord Reay.

Within the ruins of the old church of Durness there is a stone over the tomb of Donald MacMurdo MacIan Mor, of which a representation is given in fig. 3. The said Donald was a grandson of Ian Mor—the

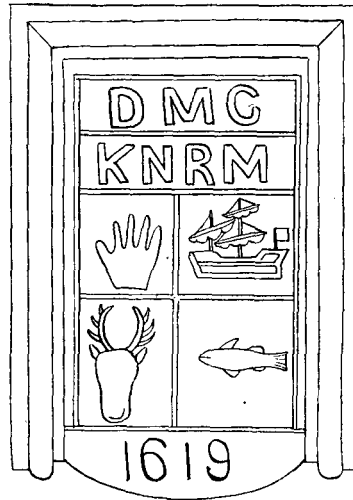


Fig. 3. Tombstone at the old Church of Durness.

illegitimate son of John Mackay of Strathnaver, who signed a bond of friendship with the Earl of Sutherland in 1518—and not a Macleod, as is erroneously stated in the *House and Clan of Mackay*. There was a family of Macleods in Assynt called *Sliochd Ian Mhor*, but this was "Donald MacMurdo MacIan Mor, chieftain of the Slight Ean Woir in Strathnaver," according to Sir Robert Gordon.¹ Now Sir Robert, for

¹ Vide *Earldom of Sutherland*, p. 254.

reasons of his own, would never allow that Durness and Edderachilis formed part of the country of Strathnaver—he was wrong in this, but we need not discuss that matter here—so that the *Sliochd Ean Woir*, of which Donald was chieftain, could not possibly be the Assynt Macleods, as this tribe is said to have been a Strathnaver one. Besides, the account which Sir Robert gives of Donald MacMurdo MacIan Mor and his adherents clearly indicates that he was a Mackay. Angus Mac-Kenneth Mac-Alister, who was slain at Hope about 1605, was a dependent of the said Donald,¹ and laid claim to some lands on Strathfleet. As John Mackay of Strathnaver, the father of Ian Mor, got a grant of these Strathfleet lands from the Earl of Sutherland in 1518,² and had as a dependent Alister the grandfather of Angus Mac-Kenneth Mac-Alister, we are justified in concluding that the latter Alister, who clung to these lands, still depended on a descendant of the house from which his ancestors got their claim to them. Ian Mor, the son of John Mackay of Strathnaver, had at least five sons, viz., “Neil M’Ane Moir, Rory M’Ane Moir, Murdoch M’Ane Moir, John M’Ane Moir, and Tormat M’Anc Moir.” It was Rory, the second son mentioned in the above extract,³ who held Borge Castle on the coast of Farr for Iye Du Mackay of Strathnaver during its siege in 1554. Murdoch M’Ane Moir, the third mentioned, was the father of Donald MacMurdo MacEan Mor, who is buried at Durness. The shield over Donald’s tomb,⁴ as shown in fig. 3, bore, along with other charges, “a hand” with extended fingers and a stag’s head. There are no daggers associated with the “hand” here, because in 1619 we have not yet reached what we have already called the transition period. In 1619 it was simply “a hand” just as on the banner; in 1630 the hand is flanked by two daggers; and after that

¹ Vide *Earldom of Sutherland*, pp. 253.

² Vide *Reay Papers*.

³ Vide Pitcairn’s *Criminal Trials*, vol. i. p. 352.

⁴ The stone which covers his grave bears the following inscription, said to have been composed by Donald, first Lord Reay, in a frolicsome moment :

“Donald Mac-Murchou heir lysis lo :
 Vas il to his freind, var to his fo :
 True to his maister in veird and vo.”

period, as the tombstones of the Mackay country prove, the hand holds a dagger.

The crested hand on the flag is clearly Mackay, and so also is the motto, *Be treun*, which always was the slogan of the clan. Indeed, the peculiar use of the word *treun* by Strathnaver people in daily conversation strikes one from other parts of the Highlands at once. Everything superlative they describe as *treun*. A fine day is *la treun*, a good horse *each treun*, and so on the whole round of the gamut. We are strongly inclined to believe that the frequent use of this vocable may be ascribed to the place which it found in their war-cry. Of the legend round the crested hand we can give no explanation.

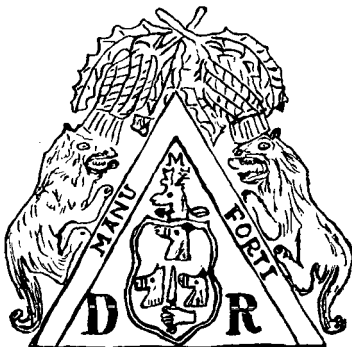


Fig. 4. Stone built into the wall of Tongue House.

The charge on the shield, a lion rampant surrounded by the double tressure and fleur-de-lys, is altogether different from that of the principal family of Mackay. In crest and motto they practically agree, in shield they are far apart. On the Tongue stone, however, which is represented by fig. 4, the shield is supported by two lions surmounted by pendant thistles. This stone is built into the wall of Tongue House, and bears the initials, D. M. R., of Donald Master of Reay, who built the house in 1678 after it had been completely destroyed by fire. The said Donald, Master of Reay, who did not survive his father's death,

was fostered among the Aberachs, and probably out of compliment to this family adopted as the supporters of his shield the lions, surmounted by thistles, which are found on the Aberach flag. We cannot imagine any other reason for diverging from the "armed men" which his grandfather, father, and successors used.

As the Aberach chieftains never recorded arms at Herald's Office nor put them on tombstones, as far as known to us, the flag alone tells what they took the liberty of using. But this we may say, they have a better title to carry "the double tressure circonfleurdelize" than the house of Sutherland, notwithstanding the grant of King George I., already referred to.

The tinctures which characterise the armorial bearings of the Lords of Reay are azure, or, and argent, or in other words blue, gold, and white ; and these are the colours in which the design on the Aberach banner is worked. The flag or *Bratach Bhan* is white. The body of the design is in blue thread, the outwards are in gold now considerably faded. The lion and outer portion of the floreated objects round the double tressure are strongly blue, so are the bars on the wrist and the loof and the letters, but the extended fingers are in gold. There are no red threads in the design, so far as we can judge, although there is a little red in the bearings of the Reay family. With this exception the Aberach tinctures are exactly those of the principal family of Mackay. Though the banner is of little value from an artistic point of view, it claims to be one of the oldest clan banners now existent in Scotland, and we are glad that it is safely preserved in the Edinburgh Antiquarian Musuem.