ARTICLES

IN SEARCH OF SOMERLED —
KING OF ARGYLL AND THE ISLES

R. ANDREW McDONALD
SCOTT A. McLEAN

"Sommerled was a well-tempered man, in body
shapely, of a fair piercing eye, of middle stature, and
quick discernment." 1

Without doubt Somerled, the regulus or king of Argyll and the
Isles, is one of the most mythologized, romanticized, and mysterious
figures that medieval Scotland proffers. In medieval times he was
a prominent — if somewhat unsavoury — character in the Roman de
Fergus; in the seventeenth century, MacDonald clan historians
mythologized him as an ancestor of the clan Donald; in modern
times he has inspired an historical novel but strangely little critical
evaluation.2 The traditions and evidence surrounding his birth, rise
to power, lordship, and even his death are without exception
obscure and subject to many different interpretations. Much of the
romanticism surrounding Somerled stems from the lack of contem-
porary source material, which makes it impossible to write any sort
of comprehensive biography. However, what can be done — and
what is most necessary and desirable — is to put Somerled into the
context of the time in which he lived in the hope of shattering
many of the myths and misinterpretations that have grown up
surrounding him, and illuminating those aspects of his life which

---

* We would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of Ted Cowan, who has
endured more discussions about Somerled than anyone should ever have to.

1 History of the MacDonalds in Highland Papers, ed. J.R.N. MacPhail, vol. I
(SHS, Edinburgh, 1914), 11.

2 Medieval: D. Legge, "Some Notes on the Roman de Fergus," Dumfrieshire
and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society, 3rd ser., 27 (1948-49), 163-
172; Seventeenth century: Book of Clanranald in A.Cameron, Reliquae Celticae:
Texts, Papers and Studies in Gaelic Literature and Philology, ed. A. MacBain and
J. Kennedy (Inverness, 1894), ii: 153-55; Modern: N. Tranter, Lord of the Isles
(1983).
can profitably be examined. These aspects include his family connections, the context of his rise to power and his position in the Hebrides and on the mainland, and the reasons underlying his poor relations with the kings of Scots in the later years of his life. Before we can examine these themes, however, it is necessary to say something of the sources upon which any study of Somerled must rest.

At the battle of Renfrew in 1164, Somerled died at the head of a great army rebelling against the king of Scots, Malcolm IV. The contemporary sources, mainly monastic in nature and hardly favourable to the native traditions of Scotland, recorded his death as just punishment from God upon the traitor who had been wickedly and impiously rebelling against (in their opinion) his natural lord. So, Somerled’s men were characterized as traitors, and Somerled himself became “foul with treachery, the most cruel enemy.” In the course of time, however, another tradition arose. First written down in the seventeenth century but likely much older, this tradition stemmed from the clan histories of the MacDonalds which were much more sympathetic toward Somerled and were eager to portray him as the ancestor of the Clan Donald, for Somerled’s son Ranald or Reginald was the father of Donald, progenitor of the Clan Donald. In these accounts, Somerled became something of a tragic figure, while the young Malcolm was portrayed as weak and exploited by his barons. Modern historians of medieval Scotland, mostly concerned with the feudalization or Normanization of Scotland under her twelfth century kings, tend to thrust Somerled into the background of their discussions and treat him as a troublesome rebel rather than a great independent lord in his own right. Indeed, the modern view of Somerled is much more akin to the medieval judgement upon him than to the seventeenth century view! But there is no good reason to reject everything in

---

3 B. Webster, Scotland from the Eleventh Century to 1603 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), 13.


5 Book of Clanranald, 153-55; History of the MacDonalds, 5-10.

the MacDonald clan histories, and the aim of this paper is to arrive at a better understanding of Somerled himself, and through him a better understanding of the state of the Hebrides in the twelfth century.

Both the date and place of Somerled's birth are lost to history. However, his ancestry and family connections can be traced with some certainty, and point to a lineage of ancient, noble stock with both Irish and Norse associations. While it is possible that his ancestors included Godfrey, son of Fergus, a powerful ninth century chieftain, we are on uncertain ground until we reach Gilla-Adomnain and Gilla-Brigate, Somerled's grandfather and father. Although their names are Celtic, the name of Somerled is Norse, meaning "Summer Sailor" or "Viking". Through marriage the family of Somerled established a network of relations with the most influential members of the Norse community of the Western Isles.

Family connections with King Olaf of Man and Harold Maddadsson, Earl of Orkney, reinforce the Norse character of the dynasty of Somerled. Sometime around 1140 Somerled married Ragnhild, the daughter of Olaf of Man, and the marriage provided him with four sons and one daughter of mixed Celtic-Norse heritage. The marriage was not his first, however, and he had at least four other sons by previous marriages, perhaps in the Celtic tradition of "handfasting". We also know that a daughter of Gilla-Adomnain named Biadok married King Harold Gillie of Norway, and that Somerled's own sister married Malcolm Macheth, an illegitimate son of King Alexander I of Scotland (1107-1124). The daughter of the match between Macheth and Somerled's sister was married to Harold Maddadsson of Orkney and Caithness (1139-1206). All these elements suggest a continual relationship between the leading members of the Isles in which alliances were encouraged.


8 Sellar, "Origins and Ancestry of Somerled".

9 See genealogy table.

GEMEALOGY OF SOMERLED

FERGUS

Godfrey

Gilla-Adomnain

Magnus Barelegs - Gaelic Mother

Biadok - Harold Gillie

Gilla-Brigait

Affrica - Olaf - Concubine

d. 1153

Godred (King of Man)

Ragnhilda - Somerled - Earlier Marriage(s)
d. 1164

Daughter - Malcolm Macheth
d. 1168

Gormflaith - Harold Maddadsson
d. 1206

Boathoc Ranald Dugall Angus Olaf Somerled Gillies Gall MacGillin Gilliecolom
through marriage, fostering and the giving of hostages, all within the context of power politics. Indeed, Somerled’s background was neither wholly Celtic nor wholly Norse, but a mixture of the two, a result of the cultural assimilation that had been taking place in the Hebrides since the earliest Viking settlements there.

The exact circumstances under which Somerled’s grandfather and father lost control of their territory to the Norse and the details concerning Somerled’s rise to power in the Isles are lost to the historian. It is just possible that Somerled’s ancestors were forfeited of their mainland territories by MacBeth, "out of revenge for standing in opposition to him after the murder of king Duncan."\(^{11}\) This cannot be corroborated. While the more colourful anecdotes provided by the MacDonald clan historians should probably be relegated to the category of fiction rather than serious history, in broad outline and sequence of events they agree with one another and with contemporary material.\(^{12}\) Given these limitations, what can be accomplished is an examination of the context of Somerled’s rise to power in the Hebrides in the twelfth century. From such a contextual analysis it is possible to say something of Somerled’s position in the Isles and on the mainland.

From a very early period — perhaps as early as A.D. 800 — the islands along the western coast of Scotland had been subject to visitations from the Vikings, who established themselves amongst the Celts of the region. The Isle of Man was the seat of the Norse sovereignty of the Isles, and was of great strategic importance to those who would control them. In the late eleventh century Godred Crovan established a power base in Man, for Norwegian royal authority was weak in the islands. This remained the political condition of the Hebrides until Magnus Barelegs, the king of Norway, sailed with a powerful fleet in 1098 to re-establish the rights of the Norwegian crown. After touching ground at the Orkneys he sailed to the Hebrides, Man, and back to the Hebrides. There he secured his conquests by a treaty with Edgar, the King of Scots (1097-1107), to the effect that all the islands off the west coast that were separated by water "navigable by a ship with the

---

\(^{11}\) History of the MacDonalds, 9.

rudder set," should be ceded to Magnus. For the next fifty years, however, internal strife in Norway precluded the exercise of strong royal authority in this area, and it was in this power vacuum that Somerled began his rise to power.

By the time of his marriage in c. 1140, Somerled had succeeded in establishing peace in the Western Isles, having already, according to the MacDonald historians, made himself the master of Lorn, Argyle, Kintyre, and Knapdale as well as Mull and Morvern. But this was only the beginning, for in the 1150's he turned his attention to the Isle of Man. In 1153, King Olaf of Man, Somerled's father-in-law, died and was succeeded by his son Godfrey. Godfrey proved to be a harsh ruler and was unable to endear himself to his subjects. According to the Chronicle of Man, a nearly contemporary source with its focus on Man, in the following year one of the local chieftains "went to Somerled, and requested from him his son Dugald, in order to appoint him king over the islands. Hearing this, Somerled rejoiced greatly," and entrusted his son to the chieftain who conducted him through all the Isles. It is difficult, on the evidence available, to suggest why Somerled's son and not Somerled himself was offered the throne of Man. Perhaps, as some scholars have suggested, the father himself was unsuitable for some reason. Somerled's position, however, was far from stable as yet. Godfrey, the deposed ruler of Man, escaped and collected a fleet of ships, and on the night of the Epiphany in 1156 a naval battle was fought between the two men. After great slaughter on both sides, an agreement was drawn up whereby the kingdom was divided between Somerled and Godfrey. The agreement quickly disintegrated, however, and in 1158 Somerled again sailed to Man with a fleet of 53 galleys and put Godred to


14 History of the MacDonallds, 6-7.


Somerled's Lordship

flight. Thus, within a space of four years, Somerled had acquired full control of the Hebrides. As far as we can tell, he experienced no further difficulties there (although his sons would soon lose control of Man once again), having consolidated his hold on the islands and made himself, for all intents and purposes, King of the Isles. The make-up of Somerled's army in 1164, comprised as it was of "the men of Argyle and of Kintyre, and of the men of the Hebrides, and the foreigners of Dublin," is suggestive of the wide extent of his influence.

Most of the medieval sources call Somerled regulus, or king, and his son Reginald styled himself regem Insularum or King of the Isles. This title is interesting for several reasons. In the first place, it suggests that Somerled ruled his territory as a de facto independent sovereign with a great degree of freedom. There had been "kings of the Isles" since about the tenth century, and the title was probably a borrowing from Irish society which, like other Gaelic societies, recognized degrees of kingship ranging from tribal kingship up to the high kingship. By the time the Norwegian kings asserted control in the Isles the title was so well established that it was impossible to suppress it, and the situation in Norway was not conducive to disciplining overmighty subjects like Somerled in the mid-twelfth century. Somerled was not unique in holding this title, for it is often accorded to other powerful figures on the Scottish mainland: the rulers of Moray were sometimes called kings, and Fergus of Galloway, Somerled's contemporary, went by the title of princeps of Galloway. However, Somerled cannot have ruled in total independence, since he paid a tribute to, and recognized the

17 Chron. Man, 18.
21 Rulers of Moray: see, for instance, Annals of Ulster in Anderson, Early Sources ii: 173. Fergus: A Scottish Chronicle Known as the Chronicle of Holyrood, ed. M.O. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1938), 137, 139. The position of Fergus as a semi-independent ruler is closely analogous to that of Somerled.
overlordship of, the king of Norway for his island holdings.\textsuperscript{22} On the mainland, Somerled also ruled more or less independently, paying a token of the overlordship to the kings of Scots.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, in political and geographical terms, Somerled lorded over two distinct spheres: his island kingdom and his mainland territory. Despite this division, there was little cultural variation within his kingdom. This situation was analogous to another great figure of the north: Earl Thorfinn II of Orkney and Caithness owed allegiance both to the king of Scots as earl of Caithness and to the king of Norway as earl of Orkney.\textsuperscript{24}

The motives for Somerled's expansion in the Hebrides are a subject of much historical debate. The seventeenth century clan historians saw the ousting of the Norse as something akin to racial hostility, and touted Somerled as a great Gaelic lord heading a Celtic revival in the islands.\textsuperscript{25} Such a view was also favoured by some nineteenth century historians, who believed that Somerled hoped to establish an independent Gaelic kingdom.\textsuperscript{26} There seems to be little support for either theory. Somerled's ancestry was closely connected with the Norse dynasties of the Isles, and it makes little sense to suppose that he entertained any racial hostility toward them. The answer to Somerled's policies in the Isles is to be found rather in the political situation of the Hebrides in the twelfth century. Weak royal authority, both Scottish and Norwegian, created a power vacuum into which a determined and powerful chieftain could expand. In addition, opportunism played a role: after all, Somerled was invited to Man and certainly took full advantage of the opportunity this presented. As one scholar puts it, "this was ... the time for men with sharp swords and ruthless ambitions to carve out

\textsuperscript{22} Duncan and Brown, "Argyll and the Isles", 194.

\textsuperscript{23} This is suggested by David I's alienation of revenues from Argyll and Kintyre to Dunfermline Abbey, Urquhart Priory and Holyrood Abbey. See A.C. Lawrie, ed. Early Scottish Charters Prior to A.D. 1153 (Glasgow, 1905), nos. cliii, ccix, ccxv.

\textsuperscript{24} Crawford, 79.

\textsuperscript{25} Book of Clanranald, 155; History of the MacDonalds, 6.

spheres of power and profit for themselves."\(^{27}\) This combination of a favourable political situation and opportunism proved successful, for Somerled was the only ruler of the central middle ages to hold sway over such a broad domain in the Hebrides. After his death, following Gaelic custom, his territory was divided among his sons, who promptly fell to quarrelling and infighting over their father’s kingdom.\(^{28}\)

As we noted earlier, Somerled’s position on the mainland of Scotland held some affinity to his position in the Isles. Effectively an independent ruler, he owed payment in recognition of the overlordship of the king of Scots. However, when that semi-independence was threatened by royal expansion westwards, the relations of Somerled with the kings of Scots soured. The last years of his life were marred by conflicts with the crown. No chronicle or other source mentions war between King David I (1124–1153) and Somerled, and one source suggests that Somerled sent a contingent to fight at the Battle of the Standard with the Scots king against the English in 1138.\(^{29}\) It was only upon the death of David I in 1153 that the *regulus* of Argyll moved to open rebellion against the young King Malcolm IV (1153–1165). In that year, Somerled supported the rising of his nephews, the Macheths, and in the words of a contemporary chronicler, "disturbed and disquieted Scotland to a great extent."\(^{30}\) The rebellion evaporated when, in 1156, Donald Macheth was captured, and in 1157 his father, Malcolm, who had been in captivity since 1134, came to terms with the king — or was bought off with the earldom of Ross.\(^{31}\) By 1159 or 1160 some kind of formal peace had been ratified between Somerled and Malcolm IV, for a charter given at Perth is dated "at the Christmas after


\(^{28}\) History of the MacDonalds, 12.


\(^{30}\) Chron. Holyrood, 187.

\(^{31}\) Chron. Holyrood, 188. There is a Malcolm Comitib de Ros named in several post-1157 charters: presumably this is Malcolm Macheth. See G.W.S. Barrow ed., Regesta Regum Scotorum I: Malcolm IV (Edinburgh, 1960), nos. 157, 179, 316. See also Duncan, Making of the Kingdom, 167.
there was peace between the king and Somerled.\textsuperscript{32}

The sudden volte-face of Somerled with regard to the crown has perplexed several generations of historians. The answer lies not in his wickedness or desire to establish himself upon the throne of Scotland, as some medieval (and later) writers conjectured, but rather is to be found in the progressive cultural and territorial alienation of the Celtic and Celtic-Norse magnates of Scotland, including Somerled, by the kings of Scots.

Foreign influence was rife in twelfth century Scotland. When David I came to the throne in 1124 as the youngest son of Malcolm III and Queen Margaret, he was introduced to a Scotland that knew little of the feudal ideas and religious orders that were flourishing in the south and on the Continent. But David had grown up largely at the court of the Anglo-Norman kings of England, William II and Henry I, and had become thoroughly imbued with these ideas during his nearly ten years' stay in the south. David was also an important landowner and magnate in England, and had served as a Justice for Henry I.\textsuperscript{33} It was only natural, therefore, that when he became king of Scots he would seek to implement some of those ideas that he had grown up with. One of David's first acts was to make grants of land in Scotland to his Anglo-French followers from England.\textsuperscript{34} By the time of his death in 1153 much of Lothian, Annandale and Fife had been subjected to feudal institutions and (save Fife), had had Anglo-French settlers planted within their boundaries. Concomitant with these land grants went the extension of royal authority — for these great new landholders were also the loyal vassals of the king. And, it must not be forgotten, along with a land grant went authority over those who lived on the land.\textsuperscript{35} Soon the Anglo-French came to monopolize positions in the king's

\textsuperscript{32} R.R.S. I, no. 175.

\textsuperscript{33} On David I see G.W.S. Barrow, David I of Scotland (1124–1153): The Balance of Old and New (Stenton Lecture, University of Reading, 1985).

\textsuperscript{34} The first grant of importance, that to Robert de Brus, is printed in Lawrie, Early Scottish Charters, no. liv.

\textsuperscript{35} W.C. Dickinson, revised and edited by A.A.M. Duncan, Scotland from the Earliest times to 1603 (Oxford, 1977), 77. The feudalization of Scotland is far too large and complex a subject to be discussed at length here. The best accounts may be found in Duncan, Making of the Kingdom and Barrow, Kingship and Unity, and The Anglo-Norman Era in Scottish History (Oxford, 1980).
household as his advisors. An examination of the witness lists of
the charters of David's successor, Malcolm, shows that of the 18
most frequently named witnesses, all but four were of Anglo-French
descent. 36

The Anglo-French brought with them a very different culture
from that of Gaelic Scotland. Written, sealed charters instead of an
oral contract or a handshake sealed land transactions; feudal law and
institutions began to replace a society that was primarily kinship
oriented; the newcomers built motte-and-bailey castles and fought
encased in steel on horseback. They also brought a new means of
determining who would succeed the king: the law of primogeniture
replaced the Celtic principle of alternating succession.

It is probably this last element against which Somerled and the
Macheths were rebelling from 1153 to 1157. The Celtic system of
succession ensured that collateral branches of a dynasty — of which
the Macheths were one — opposed a succession from father to son,
so that the kingship alternated between several branches of the
ruling house. This principle held sway in Scotland, and from 880
to 1153 there was not a single occurrence of the descent of the
crown from father to son. This long tradition was broken in 1153,
when succession by the law of primogeniture was introduced. 37
This type of succession was closely bound up with the growth and
spread of feudalism, and had become accepted in theory by the
twelfth century. 38 David I had intended that his son, Henry, should
succeed him as king of Scots, even going so far as to call him rex
designatus, king-designate, in some of his charters. 39 However,
Henry predeceased David in 1152, and David then chose Malcolm,
Henry's eldest son, to be his heir. The introduction of the law of
primogeniture, exemplified by the succession of Malcolm, was

---

36 Barrow, Introduction, R.R.S. I, 6-7. See also History of the MacDonalds,
8, for some suggestions that Malcolm received evil counsel from these barons, who
were desirous of carving up Somerled's territory amongst themselves.

37 A good discussion of Celtic succession can be found in J. Cameron, Celtic


39 Lawrie, Early Scottish Charters, nos. ccliii, ccliv. This was a borrowing from
contemporary French practice. See Duncan, Making of the Kingdom, 172.
viewed with dislike by much of the Gaelic population of the country. So, Somerled and the sons of Malcolm Macheth rebelled against the new king, who was only 12 years old. Malcolm Macheth was an illegitimate son of king Alexander I, and as such would have had some claim to the throne under Celtic law. Thus, the rebellion of 1153–1157 is best regarded as an attempt to vindicate the claims of Macheth to the Scottish throne, in opposition to the introduction of succession by primogeniture, a result of the increased Anglo-French influence brought north by David I. The rebellion was only terminated with the capture of Donald in 1156 and the reconciliation of Malcolm with the king in 1157. When peace came between the king and Somerled in 1159 or 1160, both sides must have been glad to end hostilities, and it is probably wrong to assume that one side forced peace upon the other. Somerled was, in 1154–1158, engaged in war with Godred for control of Man, and a rebellion against the king must have stretched his resources considerably. Similarly, in 1159 Malcolm was planning to leave Scotland to journey to France and must have desired to leave the realm in peace.

While war and politics often occupied the minds of medieval rulers and magnates, religious considerations also weighed heavily in an "age of Faith", and so some examination must be made of Somerled's involvement in religious matters. What evidence there is points to an intense interest in the religious community at Iona. In 1164, the year of his ill-fated Renfrew invasion, Somerled and the leading men of the Isles attempted to persuade Flaithbertach O'Brolchain, the abbot of Derry and the head of the Columban monasteries, to return to Iona. Although the attempt was ultimately unsuccessful, the episode does indicate a thriving Celtic community

40 Malcolm Macheth's lineage is problematic, due in large measure to a number of conflicting reports. We here follow the account of Orderic Vitalis, a Norman chronicler, in his Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis, ed. and trans. by M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1973), vol. iv, III, 403. For a different view see G.W.S. Barrow, ed. Regesta Regum Scotorum II: William I (Edinburgh, 1970), 13.

41 Contra Barrow, Kingship and Unity, 109: "Malcolm IV forced Somerled to come to his peace at Christmas 1160."

on Iona as late as the mid-twelfth century. Somerled's attempts to foster this community should probably be seen in the light of the rising popularity and expansion of the Continental religious orders in Scotland under the House of Malcolm Canmore. It is just possible that Somerled's attempts at bolstering the Celtic community of Iona were the religious equivalent of his rebellions against the kings of Scots.

Somerled is also associated with the Cistercian abbey at Saddell in Kintyre, founded sometime between 1160 and 1207. This association is enigmatic, not only because of problems in dating the foundation of the abbey but also because it is often attributed to Reginald, Somerled's son. Given Reginald's apparent preference for the Continental religious orders over the Celtic Church, it is perhaps more reasonable to attribute Saddell to him, though the problem cannot be pursued at length here.

For five years, then, from 1159/60 to 1164, there was an uneasy peace between Somerled and the king. Then, in 1164, Somerled — now undisputed master of the Isles — gathered a fleet of 160 ships and landed at Renfrew with an army composed of men from the Hebrides, Argyll, Galloway and Ireland. Ironically, Somerled's death is as shrouded in mystery as his life. The medieval sources all agree that a battle was fought in which the forces of the king defeated Somerled and left him dead upon the battlefield: "and in the first cleft of battle the baleful leader fell. Wounded by a [thrown] spear, slain by the sword, Somerled died." In the tradition of the MacDonald histories, however, Somerled was assassinated by his nephew, who had been bribed to perform this

---


46 Carmen de Morte Sumerledi, in Anderson, Early Sources, ii: 256.
task by some of the powerful Anglo-French lords. It is probably more reasonable, in the light of the contemporary evidence, to assume that Somerled died on the battlefield rather than at the hand of an assassin. Despite this, it is just possible that the MacDonald historians correctly encapsulated the mounting tension between Somerled and the crown when they made Anglo-French barons the ultimate instrument of his downfall.

Why did Somerled risk, and ultimately lose, his life in an attack on the king of Scots in 1164? Ever since the reign of David I, the kings of Scots had concerned themselves with building a buffer-zone of fiefs, held by loyal vassals like Walter fitz Alan, between the western regions of Scotland and the east. By extending feudalism and Anglo-French settlers westwards, the rulers of Scotland were thrusting into a peripheral, culturally distinct, region. While regions like Lothian and Fife had long been in cultural contact with the north of England, the western and northern areas of Scotland remained strongly Gaelic and Gaelic-Norse, and cherished not only their native institutions but their traditional independence, exemplified by the titles held by their rulers. Malcolm IV seemed determined to change all that. In addition to establishing a group of westward-looking fiefs, he also undertook several campaigns designed to bring independent rulers like Somerled to heel. In 1160 he three times led an army into Galloway, crushing a rebellious faction of native lords that had fled there. Fergus, the ruler of Galloway, became a monk at the abbey of Holyrood in Edinburgh and died the following year. In 1163, a laconic entry in the Chronicle of Holyrood, et rex Malcolmus Mureviensis transstulit, suggests that Malcolm, in a Stalin-like measure, enacted a mass relocation of the natives of the province of Moray, another troublesome region. According to a later medieval writer, John of Fordun, this meant that Malcolm scattered the people of Moray "so that not even one native of that land abode there" and planted his own settlers on the depopulated landscape.

47 History of the MacDonalds, 9.
48 Chron. Melrose, 11-12; Chron. Holyrood, 189.
49 Chron. Holyrood, 142. The point is contentious. For another explanation, but one which to us is not satisfactory, see Duncan, Making of the Kingdom, 191.
Even allowing for some exaggeration on the part of the medieval writers, the events of the years 1160 to 1164 illustrate clearly that not only were native Celtic or Celtic-Norse magnates being alienated at an alarming rate by the kings of Scots, but that their positions were directly threatened by royal expansion westward and lack of influence at the king's court.

It is clear that the influence of the Anglo-French lords and the culture which they brought with them caused resentment on the part of the native magnates of Scotland. Indeed, when an English observer could note that "recent kings of Scots profess themselves to be rather Frenchmen, both in race and in manners, language and culture," how must a Gaelic observer have felt? 51 While land grants in the western regions of Scotland steadily threatened the independence of Somerled, the accession of Malcolm IV alienated a much larger segment of the population. Finally, under the pressure of his advisors, Malcolm actively undertook a series of actions from 1160-1164 which left no doubt as to the fate the traditionally independent native kingdoms could expect. The revolt of Somerled in 1164 must therefore be seen as a natural development out of this background of alienation and suppression.

After the forces of the Islesmen were routed at Renfrew, the body of Somerled was carried to the island of Iona, perhaps at the king's request and expense, for burial. 52 It is fitting that he should have been buried here, in both the religious and political centre of his island kingdom, along with past Scots, Irish, and Norwegian kings. Although his patrimony was much debated among his sons, much of the territory that it had once encompassed fell within the power of the fourteenth and fifteenth century MacDonald Lords of the Isles, all of whom counted Somerled as their ancestor. 53

51 Walter of Coventry in Anderson, Scottish Annals, 330 n.6. The passage goes on to explain that "after reducing the Scots to utter servitude, they admit only Frenchmen to their friendship and service."

52 History of the MacDonalds, 10.

Professor Barrow has written of another great figure of medieval Scotland that, "it is easy to strip away the legend surrounding some notable figure of the past, but clearing away the legend does not necessarily reveal the man." The same might be said of Somerled. Ultimately, the view that is taken of this Hebridean figure must be determined by the limited source material available, and whether emphasis is laid upon the twelfth or seventeenth century sources. Perhaps the real significance of Somerled lies not in his biography, for much remains obscure. Rather, it is to be found in what the turbulent career of this powerful king of the Isles reveals about the state of the Hebrides and their relation to the rest of Scotland during the reordering of the Scottish political realm in the twelfth century.

G.W.S. Barrow, Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1976), 431.