The Decline of the Scottish Clans

MALCOLM STEWART[1]

The Scottish clan system was one of the pillars of society that maintained social stability (and political instability) in the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Scotland. Thus, the decline of the clans presented a vast and irreversible change to such realities in the Highlands and Isles,[2] not to mention to the entire realm itself. This paper references informative texts on the history of the clans and the system of which they were a part. Through this research, this paper presents a new account of the origins and circumstances of the gradual, centuries-long path to the end of the clans as a power within Gaelic Scottish culture. It endeavours to show how royal efforts to create a peaceful and prosperous society in the Highlands and Isles evolved and contributed to the emergence of phenomena that would have a much more terrible effect on the clans folk than was likely anticipated.

From James IV in the late fifteenth century to the Hanoverians in the nineteenth, the Crown of Scotland long sought to maintain order in the Highlands and Isles. Institutional policy was the chosen mechanism to change Gaelic society and it dramatically hastened the decline of the clans. This essay first studies their nature, from early formative experiences to the legendary origins of the clans, as well as their hierarchical structure, with feudal influences, in order to better understand this change. It then turns to the beginnings of the extensive

---

[1] I would like to thank Professor Matthew Koch for his commentary on the first rendering of this paper; I would also like to thank Jocelyn Rempel and the editorial team of this journal, particularly David Heintz, for all of their critical revisions and commentary in preparing the final version.

[2] The 'Isles' referred to in this paper are the Inner and Outer Hebrides, which lie off the west and northwest coasts of Scotland. They are diverse in many ways, most notably for this paper, in their populations' cultural roots. Within the last thousand or so years they have been controlled by Celts, Norse, and later, by more recognizably Scottish peoples.

changes faced by the clans, such as James VI's policy aimed at pacifying and enriching the populations of the Highlands and Isles. Finally looking at the developments and divisions that were the largely unintended consequences of such policies, it focuses on the rifts between the chiefs and clans folk engendered by chiefs' responses, often financially compelled, to these policies, in turn solidified by the political realities faced by the Highlands and Isles after the fall of the Stuarts.

"Political upheaval and social dislocation" were the major factors that led to the formation of the clans in the high Middle Ages; specifically with the Dunkeld[3] dynasty-sponsored immigration of Anglo-Norman families, the absorption of the Norse-Gaels in the Isles, and the Wars of Independence being the main formative experiences.[4] Additionally, it has been argued that the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles,[5] once spanning the western seaboard, removed a blanket of protection from the kinship groups that were the early clans, leading the groups of the Highlands and Isles into a process of fragmentation that forced them to fend for themselves in an environment of competing territorial and power ambitions.[6] This was further exacerbated by the 1545 death of Donald Dubh, the heir claimant to the Lordship, opening a power vacuum amongst kindred that

---

[3] The Dunkeld kings (also referred to as the Canmore kings) ruled earlier forms of what became the Kingdom of Scotland from 1034 through to 1290.

[4] Allan MacInnes, *Clanship, Commerce, and the House of Stuart, 1603-1788* (Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996), 1.

[5] The Lordship of the Isles came out of ancient Gaelic and Norse powers, and as the Kingdom of Scotland began to take shape formed into the second most powerful lordship in the kingdom itself (aside from that of the king), commanding great sea power in and around the Hebrides.

[6] John L. Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant: History of the Highland Clans from the Civil War to the Glencoe Massacre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 12.

had once regarded themselves as subordinates to Clan Donald; splintering Highland society into distinct clan entities.[7]

       University of Strathclyde's Allan MacInnes assures us that clanship was not isolated in the Highlands, appearing elsewhere, but was indeed intimately linked to the vitality of Gaelic culture. With the aforementioned formative experiences, kinship, feudalism, and populations in close proximity led to the production of political, social, and cultural associations that would become the clan;[8] included in this was the lore of the *clann*.[9] Scholar F. Clifford-Vaughan, in "Disintegration of a Tribal Society," speaks about clan loyalty: the bond within the clan of the common clansman to his chief, which could not be accounted for by any kind of monetary benefit (or anything of the like) but instead something more significant.[10] According to Roberts, this was reinforced by the typical practice of the chief 'flattering' the clan by recognizing them as his own kin, who in turn gave him fealty.[11] Yet despite the traditions, it is clear that the clans were rarely of common descent, especially between the peasantry and the *fine*,[12] who in some cases were of Celtic and Norman descent.[13] Thus the political entity of the clan consisted, for the most part, of the chief and his kin, as well as the leading gentry within his clan, to the exclusion of those below them.[14]

---

[7] Ibid., 2.

[8] MacInnes, *Clanship*, 1.

[9] Bruce Lenman describes the *clann* as the grouping of the 'children' of a common ancestor, at least four generations back, who often had a kind of mythical or heroic status, in *The Jacobite Clans of the Great Glen 1650-1784* (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1984), 5.

[10] F. Clifford-Vauhgan, "Disintegration of a Tribal Society: the Decline of the Clans in Highland Scotland," *Theoria: a Journal of Social and Political Theory* 43 (December 1974): 74.

[11] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 13-14.

[12] The *fine* were the elite strata of the clan.

[13] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 7.

[14] Ibid., 7.

Still, *dion*, a protective sort of morality, was of primary value to the clans and was personified in the chief as the *ceann-cinnidh*[15] and his paternal relationship with the clan members.[16] Because the clan was considered to be an extended family, the kind and charitable treatment of the needy by the chief, was considered a necessary and qualifying trait for his rule.[17] This included both hospitality and protection, which could also be found in the households of the *fine*.[18] Professor Jane Dawson of the University of Edinburgh speaks to the propensity for patronage, which was also expected to be complimented by bravery and cunning in warfare; all of these values together were admired and expounded within Gaelic society by travelling praise poets.[19] Further, the chief and *fine* were responsible for the provision of justice, which was considered a personal and hereditary authority constituting a major part of their *duthchas*.[20] It was by and large considered both the duty of the chief, and to his benefit, to ensure that all the clan was provided for; they, in turn, were bound to him by this relationship.[21] The connection between the clansman and his chief appears to have been very familiar, and it is suggested that it is "doubtful whether the ordinary men of the clan cared about the king or had even heard

---

[15] The chief, more literally interpreted as the leading member of the greater family.
[16] MacInnes, *Clanship*, 2.
[17] Ibid., 3.
[18] Ibid., 2.
[19] Jane Dawson, "The Fifth Earl of Argyle, Gaelic Lordship and Political Power in Sixteenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review* 67:183 (1988): 21.
[20] Considered the trusteeship of the clan, it's territories, traditions, etc.; MacInnes, *Clanship*, 3.
[21] Clifford-Vauhgan, "Disintegration of a Tribal Society," 75.

about the central government of [Scotland]."[22] At least in the centuries before Jacobitism,[23] this may have been true.

      Of course all descriptions of clan society cannot be applied across the board. Bruce Lenman insists that, "…one cannot really talk about a 'clan system', only about specific clans, and though generalisations are possible, exceptions may be found to all of them."[24] One such example would be Clan Campbell's general defiance of the (soon to be discussed) weakening trend of the clans. The solidarity of Clan Campbell was the essential element of their rise to power as a clan and in the person of the Earl of Argyll.[25] The cadet branches of his house maintained loyalty to the chief, and the clan became the stronger for it,[26] thus illustrating the importance of the previously noted attributes of clanship bonds. Such solidarity can be illustrated by the differences between Clan Campbell and Clan Donald; Edward J. Cowan tells how the former, which managed to reunify after internal strife, became the most powerful clan in

---

[22] Ibid., 76.

[23] Jacobitism is the movement that rose as a response to the deposition of James VII of Scotland and II of England and Ireland (Stuart) in 1689 by his daughter and son-in-law, Mary II and William of Orange — largely because James was a Catholic king in a Protestant-dominated kingdom. The movement's name comes from the Latin rendition of James' name, *Iacob*, and was focused on restoring James, then his son, and then grandson to the throne. Long after the deaths of William, Mary, and her sister Anne I of Great Britain, the Jacobites tried to restore a Stuart to the throne, but were thwarted by the Hanovers — who were descended from an earlier Stuart king.

[24] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 6.

[25] Argyll is the territory that has been under the rule of Clan Campbell for many centuries, most recently embodied in the Duke of Argyll. It is on the western coast of Scotland and includes some of the southern portion of the Inner Hebrides, between Kintyre and Cape Wrath.

[26] Dawson, "The Fifth Earl of Argyle," 11.

the Highlands and Isles; the latter fell out of the power of the Lordship of the Isles and never recovered.[27]

Essential to the maintenance of clan solidarity behind the chief were the *fir-tacsa*.[28] Within the clan equivalent of the 'chain of command' without whom a chief would be hard pressed to discipline and mobilise his clan; the *fir-tacsa* were expected to follow the lead of their chief in all matters with loyal service.[29] Performing managerial roles, they also had responsibilities of overseeing resources, manpower, and even adherence to social mores, but especially the oversight of land.[30]

Feudal land charters from the Crown gave clans an advantage besides military strength, such that the increased legitimacy to land title it entailed made feudalism a very important feature of the clan system.[31] The Dunkelds deliberately began the import of feudal traits with the encouragement of Norman families that had settled in England after the conquest,[32] in turn settling in the Scottish kingdom. This was to make the realm less susceptible to attack from Norman England, and also to propagate the advantageous aspects of feudal society throughout Scotland; such as martial techniques which would enable them to successfully act aggressively against neighbouring entities (within modern Scotland) that still had some independence from the Dunkelds.[33] Some Highland chiefs had come from Norman families that had moved up within

---

[27] Edward J. Cowan, "Clanship, Kinship, and the Campbell Acquisition of Islay," *Scottish Historical Review* 58:166 (October 1979): 144.
[28] The *fir-tacsa* were usually lesser gentry or specialists of a sort, and held their land by lease from the chief; MacInnes, *Clanship*, 15.
[29] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 13.
[30] MacInnes, *Clanship*, 18.
[31] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 12.
[32] Referring to the Conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy, in 1066, who subdued the small Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the day and became the first king of all England.
[33] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 6.

Scotland as the kingdom expanded northward, and they were also prone to quickly adopt Gaelic customs, although they usually only married into other Scoto-Norman families. Because of their familiarity with feudal practices, these chiefs headed some of the most successful clans by establishing cadet branches of their own kindred along the fringes of their lands, and consolidating chiefly power in their territories.[34] The further adoption of feudalism by other chiefs over the centuries allowed them to orchestrate the mechanisms of their respective clans more effectively, especially those concerning warfare.[35]

  The Highland clans at their peak in the 'Age of Feuds and Forays' were themselves so strong that they could defy the King's Peace and more or less ignore central Crown authority; even the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles did little to reduce the military strength of the clans. This lasted even into the Jacobite era, when in 1724 General Wade estimated the whole of the Highland clans could raise 22,000 men, mostly in support of the Stuarts.[36] Indeed, the clans exhibited their power most effectively on the national stage in conflicts that embroiled the whole of Scotland, such as the antagonism between the Covenanters[37] and the Stuart kings.[38] The reduction of the military retinues within the clans seems to have been a slowly developing process over many generations,[39] but it nevertheless seems to have had an effect on the clans' ability to engage in violence: the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a major

---

[34] Ibid., 12.

[35] Ibid., 6.

[36] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 10.

[37] The Covenanters were a branch of Protestantism in Scotland, more specifically the Presbyterian movement, that had a strong impact on Scottish history in the seventeenth century.

[38] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 16.

[39] Julian Goodare, "The Statutes of Iona in Context," *Scottish Historical Review* 78:203 (April 1998): 56.

decline in inter-clan animosity.[40] This was surely abetted by the reality that most chiefs were intelligent political actors guided by pragmatism, and not just simple minded brutes prone to fits of vendetta and violence.[41] Nevertheless, as we shall later see, military force would play an important role in the Scottish political arena.

Notwithstanding the use of military force on a massive scale, Goodare notes how James VI was intent on controlling the Highland clans rather than just coping with their existence within in his kingdom.[42] He wanted to establish Lowland style towns in the Highlands and Isles, which he hoped would bring prosperity;[43] also, he wanted to alter the clan system and the power of the chiefs in his favour, although this was met with limited success.[44] It seems that James' ambition was strong enough that he initially wanted to colonise the Highlands, but his Privy Council eventually convinced him to work with the established chiefs.[45]

To this effect, James sent Bishop Knox on a 1609 expedition into the Isles, to survey and foster negotiation, in a venture that eventually produced the Statutes of Iona.[46] These Statutes consisted of the following terms:

a. [the] Church [was] to be maintained and ecclesiastical discipline established;
b. inns to be established;
c. military retinues to be limited;
d. *sorning* — the exaction of free maintenance by those retinues — to be

---

[40] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 8.
[41] Ibid., 11.
[42] Goodare, "The Statutes of Iona in Context," 32.
[43] Ibid., 36.
[44] Ibid., 38.
[45] Ibid., 32.
[46] Ibid., 39.

abolished;

e.   the sale of wine and whisky to be banned;

f.   chiefs and leading clansmen to educate
their eldest sons in the Lowlands;

g.   carrying of firearms to be suppressed;

h.   Gaelic bards to be suppressed; and

i.   all this to be enforced by chiefs arresting
offenders and handing them over
to the authorities.[47]

Notably, these requirements did not address certain large issues such as the payment of royal rents, the legality of chiefs' titles to their lands, or obedience to the law.[48] Nevertheless, Alison Cathcart (also of the University of Strathclyde) says it appears that James saw this as acceptable way of bringing general order to the Highlands and Isles, so that Scotland might benefit economically as well as have its reputation increased on the world stage.[49]

James VI was particularly concerned with the instability of the Isles, because of their proximity to the troubled northern parts of Ireland.[50] As such, amendments were made in 1614 to shore up loyalty to the Crown, and in 1616 to ensure chiefs' obedience of the law, as well as their attendance in Edinburgh before the Privy Council on an annual basis, the adoption of Lowland agricultural methods and the English language, and the qualification that all heirs to chiefs must be able to speak English before they were legitimate in the eyes of the Crown.[51] For the

---

[47] Ibid., 50.
[48] Ibid., 42.
[49] Alison Cathcart, "The Statutes of Iona: the Archipelagic Context," *The Journal of British Studies* 49:1 (2010): 9-10.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Goodare, "The Statutes of Iona in Context," 46.

most part it seems that the Statutes were aimed at altering or repressing Gaelic culture, by undermining important institutions or traditions therein;[52] and another amendment in 1617 subverted the clans' symbolic reliance on the chiefs by banning payment to the chiefs of *calps*.[53] Overall it appears the Statutes were used to further Edinburgh's agenda of distancing Scotland as much as possible from old Gaelic culture.[54]

However, it must be noted that the Statues were not exactly a turning point in Crown policy regarding the Isles so much as part of a development of more grand policy between 1596 and 1617.[55] James was able to bring the chiefs of the Highlands and Isles under his authority via the Statutes of Iona, forcing them to acknowledge his supremacy and even ending most of the feuds that had existed between them beforehand.[56] John L. Roberts tells us that "by bringing the various feuds among the Highland clans to an end, James VI radically altered the balance of political power and territorial influence in the Highlands."[57]

Certainly the Statutes were a sustained measure in countering the military capabilities of the Highland chiefs, with the hope of reducing the martial strength of the clans overall. Amusingly enough, the Jacobite armies of the next century showed this was not a completely efficacious policy; nevertheless, they targeted the military elite of the clans, by forcing the chiefs (and soldiery) to live off their own means, without *sorning*, and discouraging the widespread use of

---

[52] Ibid., 53.
[53] *Calps* were considered death duties, paid to the chief, in compensation for a lifetime of protection; Cathcart, "The Statutes of Iona," 47.
[54] Ibid., 55.
[55] Ibid., 57.
[56] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 10-11.
[57] Ibid., 4.

firearms.[58] But since the Statutes did not explicitly attack the *fir-tacsa*, the 'formalized redundancy' of the *buannachan*[59] remained and thus the Statutes did not particularly reduce the military power of the clan.[60]

The Statutes also represented an attempt by the Crown at minimizing the drain on resources in Gaelic society, argues Cathcart, while also raising the standard of living, educating the future chiefs, and reducing the significance of the military.[61] Roberts shows that other social aspects of clanship were targeted, such as socially important displays of hospitality; as above noted, the Statutes further sought to integrate chiefs into Lowland society by forcing them to attend yearly meetings with the Privy Council and for their heirs to be educated in the Lowlands.[62] Cathcart concurs, though she insists they did not represent an attack on Gaelic culture so much as a well-intended attempt at propagating Lowland society onto the Highlands and Isles.[63] The banning of *sorning* and the like may be regarded as a boon to clan peasantry, yet Cathcart also admits that the Statutes of Iona nevertheless consolidated the power of the chiefs at the expense of the common folk.[64]

Once the chiefs were regularly visiting Edinburgh to speak with the Privy Council, Lenman considers them to have been integrated members of the Scottish aristocracy. Their clan identity was still a major concern, but national perspectives were introduced, as well as more materialistic issues.[65] This also

---

[58] Ibid., 14.
[59] The *buannachan* were a clan's mercenaries, fighters renowned around Europe through their presence in many conflicts.
[60] Goodare, "The Statutes of Iona in Context," 56.
[61] Cathcart, "The Statutes of Iona: the Archipelagic Context," 5.
[62] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 15.
[63] Cathcart, "The Statutes of Iona: the Archipelagic Context," 22.
[64] Ibid., 23.
[65] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 10.

contributed to the rise of absenteeism, as well as the increased employment of lawyers and the use of written tenancy contracts, which in turn led to the evictions of those who could not satisfy the contracts, in stark contrast with traditional Gaelic custom.[66] It may be that the economic demands of travel to the capital on a yearly basis, as well as maintaining residency there, was the cause of this. Still, most chiefs did not abandon their patriarchal responsibilities for about a century. According to Roberts, "it was only in the aftermath of the Jacobite defeat at Culloden[67] that social and economic changes began in earnest," and were at their apex with the Highland Clearances, discussed shortly, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[68] It also seems that monetary concerns were the driving force behind the changing relationships with the clan, and in tandem with other political forces, also contributed to the great suffering of the common Highlanders, while also damaging the "close inter-personal relationships" that had previously held the clan together.[69]

　　After the fall of the Stuarts, these relationships saw their worst developments. As MacInnes informs us, said royal dynasty provided a degree of protection for the chiefs, and thus the Revolution of 1688-1690 was a sore blow to them.[70] In the end, the bonds that had held the clan together were no match for the strain placed upon it by landlords' new interest in monetary

---

[66] Cathcart, "The Statutes of Iona: the Archipelagic Context," 27.

[67] The Battle of Culloden (16 April 1746) was the climax of the Jacobite rising of 1745, and with the victory of the Hanoverian forces, signaled the end of any further Jacobite Stuart claims to the throne of Britain. It was also the last battle fought on British soil, with the Jacobite forces led by Charles Edward "Bonnie Prince Charlie" Stuart (grandson of James II) and the Hanoverian forces led by the William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland (youngest son of George II Hanover).

[68] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 246.

[69] Clifford-Vauhgan, "Disintegration of a Tribal Society," 78.

[70] MacInnes, *Clanship*, 24.

profits and the challenge presented by Lowland culture.[71] Even with the majority of clan support in favour of the Stuarts, the religious and political divides in Highland society after their fall exacerbated the situation;[72] in a sad example of foreshadowing, the Highlands chiefs were not enthusiastic about the idea of Prince Charles' 1745 rebellion without substantial French support, because they feared it would end very badly for the clans.[73] With the end of the last Jacobite rebellion came the "irremediable loss of an ancient and cherished autonomy," as the clans (especially in the Great Glen) were surrounded by Hanoverian forces, and with this the clansmen lost all will to fight.[74] It may be that the concessions exacted from the chiefs after this defeat exacerbated the weakening of clan power in the Highlands and Isles. This was compounded by the fact that the role of the chief was effectively absorbed by the State over time.[75]

Yet the chiefs still seemed determined to survive politically in Britain. As time progressed, military potency became the main venue for chiefs seeking to regain power and ingratiate themselves with the Hanoverian regime, and thus "the Highlanders" were very much present in Britain's wars around the end of the eighteenth century. Yet they were met with a downturn in demand once peace reigned.[76] Nevertheless, the chiefs' (especially the Jacobite ones) use of the British Army as an avenue for reconciliation with the Hanovers is what effectively made them part of the British ruling classes.[77]

---

[71] Clifford-Vauhgan, "Disintegration of a Tribal Society," 78.
[72] Roberts, *Clan, King and Covenant*, 246.
[73] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 149.
[74] Ibid., 175.
[75] Clifford-Vauhgan, "Disintegration of a Tribal Society," 79.
[76] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 216.
[77] Ibid., 220.

Perhaps the most notorious consequence of these trends are the Highland Clearances, a traumatic set of events in Highlands history that involved the eviction of crofters (small scale farmers) from traditional clan lands in the Highlands. This was generally so that they could be turned to more profitable uses, like the raising of livestock; however, it may not have always been the case. Lenman maintains that the chiefs of the day were not necessarily seeking to expel their tenants from Scotland; rather, they wanted to keep them in their employ by shifting them to other industries such as kelping and soldiery.[78] Yet the popular record seems to give a damning account of this: even though emigration from Highland society was viewed with hostility by the aristocracy, emigration even out of Scotland was a major trend and was carried out mostly by those whose skills and success might have otherwise benefitted what remained of the clans. It appears emigration was the most effective way of protesting the actions of contemporary chiefs.[79] MacInnes says that, "clanship remained a viable concept until the later eighteenth century,"[80] and this coincides with the timing of the Clearances.

These drastic and devastating events were the result of a clear regression of the clan-chief relationship from the late sixteenth century onwards. By first giving context to this, an analysis has been developed on the nature of the clans: early formative experiences, the cultural/social mythos around the descent of the clan, and the resulting ethic; the clan structure, and its feudal attributes; and finally the military significance of the clan. A consideration follows of the causes of change experienced by the clans, beginning with the policy of James VI regarding them, specifically discussing the Statutes of Iona and their goals: stability in the Hebrides and a raised standard of

---

[78] Ibid., 218.
[79] Lenman, *The Jacobite Clans*, 213-214.
[80] MacInnes, *Clanship*, 24.

living. Yet as has been shown, these policies had much larger consequences. The chiefs themselves incurred greater financial burdens because of these new responsibilities, which were passed on to the clan, thus engendering the first part of the deep change in the chief-clan relationship. The changing political realities after the fall of the Royal House of Stuart only made the entire situation worse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cathcart, Alison. "The Statutes of Iona: the Archipelagic Context." *Journal of British Studies* 49 (2010): 4-27.

Clifford-Vaughan, F. "Disintegration of a Tribal Society: the Decline of the Clans in Highland Scotland." *Theoria: a Journal of Social and Political Theory* 43 (December 1974): 73-81.

Cowan, Edward J. "Clanship, Kinship, and the Campbell Acquisition of Islay." *Scottish Historical Review* 58:166 (October 1979): 132-157.

Dawson, Jane. "The Fifth Earl of Argyle, Gaelic Lordship and Political Power in Sixteenth-Century Scotland." *Scottish Historical Review* 67 (1988): 1-27.

Goodare, Julian. "The Statutes of Iona in Context." *Scottish Historical Review* 78 (April 1998): 31-57.

Lenman, Bruce. *The Jacobite Clans of the Great Glen 1650-1784*. London: Methuen London Ltd., 1984).

MacInnes, Allan. *Clanship, Commerce, and the House of Stuart, 1603-1788*. Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996.

Roberts, John L. *Clan, King and Covenant: History of the Highland Clans from the Civil War to the Glencoe Massacre*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.