

Clan Chief, Clan Embarrassment: The Seventeenth-Century Campbells

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ABSTRACT

The following discussion explores the reciprocal relationships between Campbell chiefs and their kindreds during the particularly fraught era of the three Gilleasbuigs each of whom, disastrously for their clan, defied their Stewart kings, until a fourth, the tenth earl, became first Duke of Argyll in 1703.

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It is a pleasure to be invited to contribute to this collection honouring John MacInnes, a man whose friendship and knowledge I have long been privileged to enjoy. One discussion to which we have frequently returned concerns Gilleasbuig Gruamach, a designation first conferred on Archibald Campbell seventh Earl of Argyll, though I am convinced that in Gaelic tradition ‘the Grim’ is frequently applied to the eighth earl as well and perhaps the ninth, all of whom were potentially disastrous for the well-being of their clan. The name Gilleasbuig, the English version of which is Archibald, was not uncommon in the House of Loch Awe. It can be traced as far back as the mid-thirteenth-century and it was conferred on the second, fourth and fifth earls of Argyll, as well as the first and second dukes. The following discussion explores the reciprocal relationships between Campbell chiefs and their kindreds during the particularly fraught era of the three Gilleasbuigs each of whom, disastrously for their clan, defied their Stewart kings, until a fourth, the tenth earl, became first Duke of Argyll in 1703.

Professor Willie Gillies has convincingly challenged the view that the Campbells somehow became less Gaelic the more deeply they were involved in national politics. If anything, their role on the larger stage enhanced their reputations. Bardic verse celebrated the activities of Sliochd Diarmaid chiefs from the battle of Flodden to the time of John second Duke of Argyll, who died in 1743, while Campbell poetry continued to be composed into the nineteenth century (Gillies 1978: 261). Although it is true that much anti-Campbell poesy appeared, particularly in the seventeenth-century, we are left with a lingering suspicion that a residual pride in Campbell achievement survived in Gaeldom, that Gaels rejoiced in the Gaelic-ness of the Campbells while deploring many of their more outrageous actions. Their incredible success as a clan was a source of envy as much as despair on the part of their enemies, who fell far short of their achievements.

A recent account indicates how troubled and vexatious the career of Gilleasbuig Gruamach, seventh earl, actually was (Campbell 2002: 91–197). Just nine years old when his father died in 1584, he was taken into the protection of the eighteen-year-old James VI, while his affairs, and hence those of the clan at large, were assigned to six Campbell trustees. His minority was seen by some of his powerful kinsmen as an opportunity for personal aggrandizement. Matters came to a head when Black Duncan of Glenorchy, in alliance with the Earl of Huntly, orchestrated a conspiracy in which Campbell of Cawdor and James Stewart, Earl of Moray, were murdered. Also targeted was Gilleasbuig, who believed, with some reason, that his uncle, Glenorchy, was attempting to replace him as chief. The ensuing chaos set the great harp of the Highlands ajangling, setting off wide reverberations in the Lowlands as well (Cowan 1986).

In the aftermath, Clan Campbell came close to the fragmentation that had bedeviled such clans as the Macdonalds and the Macleods. Argyll was reprimanded by the privy council for failing to keep good order among ‘all persons of the surname of Campbell’ (RPC: v, 190). The main threat to his person reposed in his own kindred; Archibald’s legendary grimness was clan inspired. Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed thanks to the efforts of Campbell of Loudon, chief of the ‘English Campbells’ (Cowan 1986: 292–3) and John, Earl of Mar, who secured an obligation in 1595 between Argyll and Glenorchy. ‘Evil disposed persons’ had orchestrated coldness between the two but Argyll swore never to act deceitfully towards his kinsman. In the event of ‘misreports’, he was to give two weeks notice of a meeting in the Lowlands to investigate them. Glenorchy agreed to ‘behave kindly’ to his chief, refusing to believe any derogatory reports without consulting him.

Confidence in such agreements was shaken as other details emerged, most worryingly of plots against young Argyll inspired by other Campbell kin. Comital confidence was again shattered when the earl, seeking vengeance upon Huntly, was defeated at the battle of Glenlivet; ‘Argyll, *puer, gratt*’ (Calderwood 1844: V, 350).

Argyll received several commissions to hunt down MacGregors, largely ignored until 1602 when new harsh methods, reinforced by the Crown, generated disgust and alarm throughout the Gàidhealtachd, compounded when, shortly after James moved south to London, he granted him a commission of fire and sword against Macdonalds, Macleans, MacLeods and Clanranald, colourfully described as ‘an infamous byke of lawless limmers’ (HMC, iv, Argyll MSS: App. 489). Acquisition of the lands of these clans was the incentive to intensify MacGregor hunting until only twelve remained alive. Hundreds of people from Dumbarton to Dornoch were fined for sheltering MacGregors. Argyll was accused of pursuing personal agendas with reference to the western clans. There can be little doubt that he did more to blacken the name of Clan Campbell than any of his predecessors, bequeathing much pent-up trouble to his successors. Gilleasbuig was engaged in nothing short of MacGregor genocide. That James approved such a policy was reflected in his admission that, ‘We wilbe spairing to dispose upon ony pairt of these Yllis, and unwilling to *exterminate, yea skairse to transplant the inhabitants of the same, bot upon a just caus*’ [my italics] (RPC viii: 745–6). It seems that in the view of the king the clan as a whole was as culpable as the chief for the atrocities of which they were accused.¹

As the climax to a succession of woes, Argyll, in 1617, became, according to Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty, ‘the most obstinate and rigid papist that ever was upon the earth’ (Millar 1912: 86), decamping to Spain and further seriously threatening clan fortunes.

Once again the heir was a minor, Archibald, Lord Lorne, the future marquess. The situation demanded swift action, as represented by the earliest surviving correspondence to run in Lorne’s name, but masterminded by his uncle, Campbell of Lundy, of the Angus Campbells (Cowan 1981), as well as Glenorchy and Lawers. Lorne’s letter to the heads of the name, written in response to royal demands, indicated that if they did not take action the entire clan was threatened with total destruction:

I think or now ye ar advertised of the cours my lord and father hes takin, quherby he has so kindled his majesties wrath aganes him and his hous, that it sall not mis presentlie to be indangered, if not altidder ruined (unless) all instrumental means by the wisdom and mediatioun of good freindis be speciallie used for the mitigation of his majesties heiche displeasure. And because natur and dewtie doe boeth concur to astrict me to succor both my father and the hous of my expectatioun, were it the derrest blood of my bodie (Innes 1859: 246)

He entreated all recipients of the letter to appear at Edinburgh on 15 December 1617 to give their best counsel as to how to satisfy the king ‘and the approaching danger to my father and his house spedilie prevented’. Lorne must have been gratified by the largest assembly of the name ever seen in the capital, when Lundy and other Campbells were appointed to manage the earldom. Even more impressive perhaps was a gathering at Inveraray a month later, when it was agreed that the 1592 conspiracy had threatened the ‘prejuduce, hurte, damage and losse’ of the ‘hail kyn and freindis of the name of Campbell’, and the feuds were solemnly quenched (Innes: 243–5; Cowan 1986: 280–1). Thus, in an impressive example of clan cohesion, securing the chiefship and the succession of its future occupant, the present danger was averted.

¹ The Crown’s dealings with the MacGregors and other clans are exceedingly complex. I have attempted to discuss these developments, unsatisfactorily I fear and with considerable overlap, in at least three articles: Cowan 1979, 1986 and 2006.

Gilleasbuig died in London having made one last visit, overlooked by recent authorities, to his homeland in 1634 (Stevenson 1980: 49–50; Campbell 2002), when he was almost entirely shunned by his kindred. His purpose was to sort out an acrimonious dispute between Lorne and his half-brother, Lord James, about the possession of Kintyre. Campbells were never short of disputes, least of all with their own kind. But Lorne had the right idea about such disagreements when he advised Glenorchy and Glenlyon to keep their quarrel with one another out of the courts, ‘to lat the business be rewlaite be the mediatioune of freindis for boith your weilles’ (Cowan 1986: 279). Clan internalisation of contentious issues and avoidance of Edinburgh lawyers would benefit Campbell cohesion.

In 1638 Lorne became eighth Earl of Argyll and leader of the Covenanting Revolution. It is doubtful if his followers shared his deep presbyterianism. In the course of the civil wars, Campbells became the targets of royalist troops, clan hatred and a Catholic crusade; they endured overwhelming defeats and hundreds of dead and wounded at the hands of Montrose and Alistair Mac Colla; their estates suffered devastation. Argyll’s own military reputation was not enhanced by his habit of retreating from conflict, leaving his kindred to perish at Inveraray, Inverlochy and Kilsyth. He is often reputed a politician of extreme deviousness, characterized by a strabismus which gave rise to his designation as ‘gley’d eye’d Archibald’. He was also a ruthless negotiator and a completely unforgiving enemy. He placed himself at the head of the Covenanting movement out of religious conviction and genuine concern for the survival of the Scottish kirk, and because he wished to contain the revolutionary fervor of some of the covenanters, notably the ministers. He believed that ‘popular furies would never have end if not overawed by their superiors’. He hoped for an accommodation with Charles I as a covenanted king, but as the monarch’s actions became more extreme, so too Argyll’s radicalism. There is no doubt that he actually discussed the possible deposition of Charles, yet he was revolted by the execution of the king. He must have realized that the arguments justifying the removal of a king could also apply to a clan chief (Cowan 1994).

There is some truth in the view that he manipulated support for the Covenant to his own advantage in pursuing clan agendas, but he also suffered greatly in the same cause at the hands of his enemies. At the end of his life, Argyll admitted that all of his plans and schemes went awry. Whatever he attempted had unforeseen consequences, such as his attempted accommodations with Charles II, Cromwell and Monck. His career is an example to historians of the inconsistencies in the lifetimes of individuals whose decisions may be made for reasons of policy, pragmatism, pique or prejudice in circumstances that are far beyond their personal control. Awaiting execution in 1661, he memorably described himself as ‘a distracted man, a distracted subject, of a distracted time wherein I lived’.

At the Restoration he hastened south to greet Charles II, but was promptly shipped back to Edinburgh for trial as a traitor. When found guilty, his titles and lands were automatically forfeited, and once again the mighty Clan Campbell feared for its future. Following the execution, Argyll’s heir, Archibald Lord Lorne and his ‘freinds’ wrote, pledging their loyalty to their ‘dear father’, Charles II, just as all previous Campbells had been faithful to their monarchs ever since the time of ‘that great rebel Somerled’, in whose overthrow they assisted. The ‘inbred loyalty of their house’ had been consistent from the reign of Robert Bruce to that of James VI, who described the Campbells as ‘the soundest and most loyall family to the croun of Scotland that ever he knew’. Campbells had always been active in suppressing the ‘many horrid insurrections and rebellions of Islanders, and remote mountanous men that have been broken, destroyed and overthrown by our Cheiffs and ther friends’. No chiefs, cousins or cadets had ever been charged with disloyalty or disobedience,

but by the contrar they have alwayes been most willing, to sett themselves for bearing doun the insollencie of the remote rebellious lawless men, which is much occasioned by the remoteness and distance of these places quher we live, far from the lawes and Justice, the horror of rocks, woods and mountains contributing much unto

this. Let the most ancient of men be consulted, and all the progress of the history of this Nation considered and all that we have said shall be found to be certain and unanswerable.

If the king would consider their track-record ‘then it shall be no greif to your Majestie, nor offence of heart, that yow have not rooted out so loyall and so ancient a family, who in most backslyding tymes have still retained our loyaltie and integrity’ (*Letters*: 45–50).

Thus the Campbells sought to avoid their extirpation. It is noteworthy that recent conflicts with the Macdonalds, as represented by Alistair mac Colla during the Montrose wars, were made to resonate with the idea that Clan Donald, personified by Somerled, had been rebels as long as the Campbells had been royalists. The references to remoteness and justice remind the king that his forebears could not have ruled the Gàidhealtachd without Campbell assistance. Finally Charles had not yet outlawed the whole clan and hopefully he would not do so.

Argyll had taken the precaution of encouraging his eldest son and heir to cultivate more promising links with monarchy than his own personal history permitted. Father on one side and son on the other was a long-standing ploy of the Scottish nobility, and while Argyll cultivated the Cromwellians, his son supported the royalists. The stratagem paid off. The new earl, thirty-four year-old Archibald, ninth of Argyll, succeeded his father, regaining his titles (but not the marquessate) and most of the comital lands in 1663. The king issued an Act of Indemnity which specified a long list of Campbells who were exempted and heavily fined. Throughout his lifetime he had to fight off the malicious intentions of some of the most skulduggerous politicians to disgrace the pages of Scottish history, while the Campbell estates were drowning in debt. He is notable for having survived a trepanning operation as a young man, and he also has the distinction of having received two death sentences, both for leasing-making, in 1662 and 1681. The latter followed his taking of the Test Oath, in good faith, in so far as it was ‘consistent with itself and the protestant religion’. On that occasion he was undoubtedly the victim of a plot, but he managed to escape from Edinburgh Castle, thus avoiding beheading until 1685 when he led the Scottish wing of Monmouth’s rebellion (Willcock 1907).

There is at Inveraray the transcript of a document from the Breadalbane Charter Chest, apparently commissioned by John Campbell of Glenorchy, recently raised to the peerage as first Earl of Breadalbane, and drawn up by Sir James Dalrymple, Viscount Stair, an associate of Argyll when both were exiled to the Netherlands and author of the famous *Institutions of the Law of Scotland* (AT, c. 1686).² The memorandum opposes planned legislation concerning the abolition or prescription of the surname Campbell after the forfeiture and execution of Argyll. It considers whether there was any provision in Scots Law for outlawing the Campbell name due to the crimes of the chief or other prominent Campbells; second whether it was in the interest of king and kingdom to procure the proposed abolition of the surname; and third a consideration of the precedents for such abolition. It categorically states:

Ther is no standing law declaring or inacting that upon the rebellione of the chief of the clan or any pairt of the clan that the rest shall be obleidged to quite ther name and the Surname to be abolished . . . But the clans in Scotland being septs or tribes of people generally haveing lands lyeing together, and sometimes without lands or fixed residence, the Chief of these Clans had by our ancient custome a despotick power or influence upon his clane or name which in severall exigencies in the more ancient and ruder times was of great use and subserviencie to the Monarchie. These Cheiftanes

² At time of writing I have been unable to establish whether the original document survives in the Breadalbane Collection at NAS. I have consulted the Argyll Transcripts at Inveraray Castle, a copy of which is held in the former Scottish History Department at the University of Glasgow. I first consulted the Argyll Muniments around 1970 since when all my call numbers are hopelessly out of date. I understand that the Muniments are currently being re-organised and will soon be available for public access.

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being alwayes in capacitie and readines with ther clans for the publict service and thereafter when civillie, lawes and good maners were more introduced the law did obledge in many caices the cheiff for the faults of his clan, bot by the ancient policie of this Kingdome the clan had never power to restrain or coerce their cheiff and by noe law or custome was ever a clan in Scotland made lyable or obnoxious for the crymes of ther chief or of particular persones of the clan, wherin the rest were not involved.

Herein it was clearly forgotten that the Campbells had coerced, if not Gilleasbuig Gruamach, then his office, in 1617. Later in the document there is mention of the MacGregors who, of course, were held as culpable as their chief to the point of near destruction, a liability which brought the Campbells great riches. Stair's second argument against proscription was that 'the name is universallie scattered through the Kingdome and more of that surname in the Lowlands than the Highlands, having no dependence by holding or uther tyes to ther cheiff, nor no communicatione amongst themselves, bot the bulk of that name, nather by speech, garb or inclination, doeth affect the highland method or custome of a clan, bot are as polyte regular and descreit persones as any surname of the Kingdome'. He must however have been aware that in the past Campbells, like other clans, could and did claim that anyone sharing the name, irrespective of residence, from Angus to Ayrshire, were members of the clan whose chief they were expected to acknowledge.

Stair then asserts that even when people have taken, or been forced to use, another name, they are still known to be descendants of their original clan. Abolition of the name Campbell would only be practical where the Lowland Campbells were concerned, 'which are not properlie a clan or in hazard to raise or rune together for ther cheiff or with the clan'. Yet bearers of the name might be resentful if it was abolished and so enraged as to 'follow the resentments of the cheiff'. Also there were Campbells who did not claim to be descended from the main family and did not own Argyll as their chief. It was not just, that these should be obliged 'to abandon the names of ther Inogenitors upon a suspitione of ane inbred disloyaltie affecting the blood of severall families'.

As to the comons of the name of Campbell it is not so considerable and for the heretors they are generallie in the Lowlands disentangled from the Clan, and the heretors of the highlands doe generallie holde of the familie of Argyle with sever (stringent) clausses of personall services and attendances. And if these heretors shall be allowed to continew to braith in a frier ayre and have the honor to hold immediatlie of his Majestie they wold quicklie perceave the advantage of ther change and turne ill favorable not onlie to the rebellious practices of the Earl of Argyle bot even to any motion that might restore the familie.

On his third point, concerning precedents for abolishing clans and surnames for the chief's crimes, he cites the Comyns, the Ruthvens, the MacLeods of Lewis and the MacGregors, only to state that the evidence for the Comyns is inconclusive. The others are not discussed, as the document concludes very abruptly.

Stair was possessed of one of the greatest legal minds that Scotland ever produced, but it has to be wondered if his third point defeated him, for the MacGregor name was clearly proscribed. His paper seems to argue that the clan has no status in Scots law, and he minimizes the reciprocal relationship between clansmen and chief. While these matters require further consideration, Stair writes as if he wishes to abrogate clans altogether, writing them out of history, in anticipation of the abolition of heritable jurisdictions in 1747. Three years before the first Jacobite Rising, in his mind, the clans were already redundant.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AT Argyll Transcripts, Inverary Castle. Copies in Scottish History Department, University of Glasgow.
- HMC Historical Manuscripts Commission.
- Letters* *Letters to the Argyll Family*. Maitland Club, Edinburgh (1839).
- RPC Register of the Privy Council of Scotland, 1st Series. J. H. Burton *et al.* (eds). 14 vols. Edinburgh (1877–1898).

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