

A SHORT STUDY OF THE CLAN SYSTEM

by

Marshall T. Bassett

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When I first found out that I would be giving this paper, I knew without too much thought what my topic would be. "I must write something about Scotland," I said to myself. Why I came to this swift conclusion, I am not altogether sure. I have never been to Scotland, and have no warm personal reminiscences about that land. I really know very little about the subject at all. However, I do know that I have always felt a great affinity for this country, in particular the Highlands.

Why is this so? Due to the national background of much of our population in this part of the country, I speculate that the vast majority of us here tonight have more than a drop of Scottish blood in our veins, so perhaps some of you will share my feelings. Although my family has been on this continent for two centuries and more, a certain pride in being of Highland descent and interest in things Scottish still exists. Although we are far more English than anything else, being of English descent is just a fact with us. We do not feel English-- we feel Scottish. Why do these attitudes persist after so great a time? How could one ethnic orientation be strong enough to outlive another so? I did not know really until I began to study the clan system, in particular the Highland clans. But then I discovered the attributes of this social system which has enabled bits and pieces of that system to survive in me. I shall briefly describe what the Highland clans were (for a clan no longer is).

A useful, but not very elegant way to begin is with a definition.

What is the etymology of the word clan? It is a Gaelic word which means, literally, children. (This may be a good time to explain that the principal language of the Highlands, that is, the area to the north and west of Scotland, was Gaelic, or Irish, as it is sometimes called, the Scots and Irish being basically of the same racial stock. This language is spoken today in some areas of the Highlands, although by only some 70,000 people.¹ However, if you happen to hear that someone was speaking "Scots", that is really the dialect of English spoken principally by the Lowland Scots who dwell in the area just north and northeast of England, more densely populated, with a long history of commerce, industry, and as we shall see, antagonism to its backward Highland brothers.)

This word, clan, really quite aptly grasps the spirit of what a clan was. One can better understand clans if he thinks of them as social rather than political groups. The clan chief developed into a patriarchal figure with ties of kinship with his people, rather than a feudal lord, such as a baron, earl or duke, as was the case with England and most of Europe. That is to say, the poorest Highland clansman may have viewed his chief as a superior, but he felt no social inferiority to him. He did not view himself as the peasant of the chief.

How did this unique social pyramid come into being? As well as I can understand, it has its roots, theoretically, in the pre-Christian Celtic culture. The Highlands at that time was extremely primitive, rural, and isolated. Communities were closely knit and autonomy was local. These

¹Gordon Donaldson, Scotland: The Shaping of a Nation (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974), pp. 239-240.

small areas were governed by kings, and these kings were not only socio-political, but were also the centers of the religious lives of these people. It was said that when he became king, the Lucky Spirit of the community entered his body and dwelt there. He was sacred, and thought to have been descended from the gods.² Even after the advent of Christianity, these personages continued to receive the awe and respect that had been given them in the previous centuries of pagan worship. As time progressed, it was only natural that with the immobility of society, that a great deal of intermarriage occurred in these communities. The blood of these legendary kings was united with that of other families of the district, from generation to generation, until it was felt by one and all that they were related, part of one great family, the head of which was descended in the male line from that demi-god of old. As mobility increased, it was only natural that new genes were added to the clan pool, but still this strong feeling of kinship continued. Studying this triggered something my mother told me once long ago. Her mother's family name was MacLees. I asked her once if it was a great clan. She replied that no, it wasn't, but she thought they were related to the MacPherson family. If she is correct, it must have been one of the many families which intermarried with the MacPhersons, and lived in their territory, as part of their greater clan.

It is therefore easy to imagine why the great pride of the Highland Scot developed. Each clansman felt himself to be the descendent from ancient times of royal blood, no matter how rude his hut or low his occupation.

²Moncreiffe of that Ilk and David Hicks, The Highland Clans (London: Bramhall House, 1967), p. 28.

He had as much of it in him as his chief. His name was a constant reminder of his lineage, as the clan name was usually a patronymic. For example, the great Clan Donald were descended from one King Donald, who was called Lord of the Isles in the thirteenth century. The prefix "Mac" means "son of", hence all those bearing the surname "Macdonald", or related through the female line to one, felt themselves, whether they were or not, to be progenies of this one man. I will quote a story from one of my source materials to illustrate this:

When George II asked to see a Highland soldier, two Black Watch privates, Gregor McGregor, 'commonly called Gregor the Beautiful', and John Campbell, son of Duncan Campbell of the family of Duneaves in Perthshire..., were sent to London. 'They displayed so much dexterity and skill in the management of their weopens, as to give perfect satisfaction to His Majesty. Each got a gratuity of one guinea, which they gave to the porter of the palace gates as they passed out. They thought that the King had mistaken their character and condition in their own country.' For Private Gregor McGregor was as much a descendent of the original chief, Gregor of Golden Bridles..., as was the then Chieftain of the Children of the Mist, and Private John Campbell could trace his descent from Great Colin as easily as could the Duke of Argyll himself.³

However, in many cases this was a psychological union, because, indeed, not all people of the lower orders were related to the chief's family. Some of them adopted the last name of the family out of deference to it. Many did not. But the effect of living in amongst such a powerful and all pervading tribe had the same effect as a blood tie- they felt themselves to be members of the clan.

So this is why, I believe, hundreds of miles of ocean and two centuries

³Ibid., p. 30.

have not completely obliterated the Highland pride that was a legacy of remote ancestors. It has been transferred to me by the forbears I have known and by those that went before, in some of their writings.

The figure of the clan chief is central in understanding the way the clan worked. He was very powerful within his family, very respected, and as I have said, even mystical. Many chiefs were granted titles of nobility from time to time for service given to the faction on the throne at the time, and became members of the ruling class that governed Britain. Most became educated, some even cultured, but that did not alter the simple relationship they had with their people. They were patriarchal figures, and their rulings were law, unlike English nobles, whose discipline was structured somewhat by Parliamentary law and their baronial courts, which ruled on the grievances and crimes of the serfs. The Scottish nobleman as chieftain had the power of life and death over his clansmen. He was often asked to arbitrate disputes between clansmen, even if they had moved from the area and no longer lived on the chief's lands. The chief quite often looked after the welfare of those who could not provide for themselves- the old, the widowed, or orphaned.

Land tenure was somewhat different than the English system of a terminable lease. A chief very often would grant a "feu" to a son or valuable cousin, a portion of land for a fee payment which implied security of tenure. This son might feu portions of this land to his son, or to a vassal, and so forth, on down the line, until all the land was utilized. However, small holdings were not feudalized but were rented on a year-to-year basis. In certain portions of the Highlands, a chief might grant not a

feu, but a tack, which was a lease which could extend as many as three generations. At the end of that time, if that branch of the family had prospered, it could buy the tack from the chief. In this way, the chief divided his vast holdings between those who were capable and aggressive managers and secured a strong and loyal heirarchy beneath him. There were instances in which some branches of a clan broke away from the parent clan, and acquired, by hook or crook, lands in a different area of Scotland. They became, within a few generations, in effect, different clans, although in matters of national policy they would often follow the lead, or give assistance to, the more powerful branch of the family. The finest example of this was the powerful Campbell clan, which had several branches living in separate lands. The most influential branch was always the Argyll Campbells, headed by the Duke of Argyll.

The most valuable service that a chief could expect from his pyramidal system of alliances was aid in time of war. At these times he could count on the support of great numbers of his people. The "rallying of the clans" has occurred many times in the history of Scotland, for which many a poor, lower order clansman has given his life for a cause, or political career about which he knew nothing, but which changed the course of British history. At these times clansmen were brave, fierce, and capable fighters, but undisciplined, and would usually be routed by a well-trained, well-led army. In many cases great numbers of clansmen would simply fade back into the hills if the campaign lasted too long. However, this lack of purpose did not extend to fighting against a neighboring clan with which one was feuding. The Hatfields and McCoys had nothing on these

people. Ill will lasted for generations amongst some clans, and raids against the farms, villages, and strongholds of one's enemy not only brought redress of old grievances, often in a brutal fashion, but also plunder in the form of household goods, money, horses, and most importantly, cattle. Cattle was as much to Highland culture as it is today in many African cultures. The head of cattle one possessed was the measure of a man's wealth and importance. And usually the cattle a man did possess had once belonged to another.

As one might imagine, the clan system greatly retarded the development of Scotland as a unified state. The continuing isolation of these small, independent state-like areas deterred the building of roads and bridges. Animal husbandry continued to be the only "industry" in the country. Commerce did not exist on any scale, and there were no prosperous towns. The people remained uneducated, violent, poor, and without any political consciousness beyond the clan allegiance. All political energy went into satisfying the personal political aims of the clan head. There was a central monarch, but he had to be a person of great strength and political savvy in order to maintain control over a nobility very likely to change allegiance with the next wind shift.

This was in sharp contrast to the Lowlands, which had developed by the seventeenth century, into a region of bourgeois merchants and farmers. The Calvinist movement appealed to these thrifty people, and the Presbyterian sect which developed from it was taken up with the utmost zeal, while many Highland chiefs remained Catholic. These differences were

were quite pronounced enough, but great hatred between the two regions was assured by the constant raids by the Highlanders on Lowland farms and villages. Imagine the horror that must have been engendered in the Lowlanders to see hoards of fierce, screaming clansmen swooping down out of the hills, bare legged, claymores swinging, and hear the terrible drone of the bagpipes in thier ears. As a matter of fact, the ministers of King Charles II of England, in an effort to frighten the Lowland Scots into abandoning the Presbyterian faith, in 1678 billited an army of 4,500 Highland clansmen in several of the western shires of the Lowlands. Although no one was reported killed by these troops, the Highlanders carted off everything they could carry. This did not serve to endear the Stewart monarchs to the Lowland counties.⁴ As a result, the Lowland clans were a great service to the later Hanoverian monarchs in breaking the power of the Highland clans, and forever destroying this way of life.

I suppose that this brief treatise has not altogether reinforced the idyllic view of the Highlands that Queen Victoria, Robert Burns, and other Nineteenth Century Scotiofiles gave the world. However, I think it is my duty as an American to look at the Old Country with the proper perspective. This should be a condition universal to just about all Americans. We must always remember that our people came to this land not out of choice, but from necessity, to escape religious or political persecution, hunger or poverty. We need not look back at any country with nostalgia. The pride I feel for my Scottish ancestors was born in their perseverance,

⁴John Prebble, Glencoe, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 63-64.

their sobriety, toil, thrift, and religious devotion, qualities which serve to inspire me today. These were the qualities upon which this country was built.

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