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Warfare in the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland, c. 1544-1615

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Abstract

Warfare has long been associated with Scottish Highlanders and Islanders, especially in the period known in Gaelic tradition as ‘Linn nan Creach’ (the ‘Age of Forays’), which followed the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493. The sixteenth century in general is remembered as a particularly tumultuous time within the West Highlands and Isles, characterised by armed conflict on a seemingly unprecedented scale. Relatively little research has been conducted into the nature of warfare however, a gap filled by this thesis through its focus on a series of interconnected themes and in-depth case studies spanning the period c. 1544-1615. It challenges the idea that the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century was a time of endless bloodshed, and explores the rationale behind the distinctive mode of warfare practised in the West Highlands and Isles.

The first part of the thesis traces the overall ‘Process of War’. Chapter 1 focuses on the mentality of the social elite in the West Highlands and Isles and demonstrates that warfare was not their *raison d'être*, but was tied inextricably to chiefs’ prime responsibility of protecting their lands and tenants. Chapter 2 assesses the causation of warfare and reveals that a recurrent catalyst for armed conflict was the assertion of rights to land and inheritance. There were other important causes however, including clan expectation, honour culture, punitive government policies, and the use of proxy warfare by prominent magnates. Chapter 3 takes a fresh approach to the military capacity of the region through analysis of armies and soldiers, and the final thematic chapter tackles the conduct of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles, with analysis of the tactics and strategy of militarised personnel.

The second part of this thesis comprises five case studies: the Clanranald, 1544-77; the Colquhouns of Luss and the Lennox, 1592-1603; the MacLeods of Harris and MacDonalds of Sleat, 1594-1601; the Camerons, 1569-1614; and the ‘Islay Rising’, 1614-15. This thesis adopts a unique approach by contextualising the political background of warfare in order to instil a deeper understanding of why early modern Gaelic Scots resorted to bloodshed. Overall, this period was defined by a sharp rise in military activity, followed by an even sharper decline, a trajectory that will be evidenced vividly in the final case study on the ‘Islay Rising’. Although warfare was widespread, it was not unrestrained or continuous, and the traditional image of a region riven by perpetual bloodshed has been greatly exaggerated.

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would ultimately prove to be a rewarding experience. They were right. My mere thanks seem trifling when measured against the lifetime of love and support they have offered me. Therefore, to make a start towards repaying that debt, I dedicate this thesis to them.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature:

Printed name:

Conventions and Abbreviations

For personal names, modern Gaelic forms are generally used for forenames (e.g. Aonghas not Angus), while English forms are used for surnames (e.g. MacDonald not *Mac Domhnaill*). This strikes a compromise between authenticity and recognisability.

For place names, English forms are used, in accordance with RCAHMS.

All money is in Scots unless otherwise stated.

The following abbreviations have been used:

<i>AT</i>	<i>Argyll Transcripts</i> (Transcriptions of various charters relating to the Clan Campbell and their lands)
<i>CSPS</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland</i>
<i>CSPI</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers relating to Ireland</i>
<i>GCA</i>	Glasgow City Archives
<i>HP</i>	<i>Highland Papers</i>
<i>NRS</i>	National Records of Scotland
<i>RMS</i>	<i>The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland</i>
<i>RPC</i>	<i>The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland</i>
<i>RPS</i>	<i>The Records of the Parliaments of Scotland</i>
<i>RSS</i>	<i>The Register of the Privy Seal of Scotland</i>
<i>SA</i>	Stirling Archives
<i>SGS</i>	<i>Scottish Gaelic Studies</i>
<i>SHR</i>	<i>The Scottish Historical Review</i>
<i>TGSI</i>	<i>Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness</i>

Introduction

Among the most persistent stereotypes of the Highlands and Isles of Scotland is that it was a region of endless war, disorder, and lawlessness. Long before James VI of Scotland labelled the inhabitants of the Western Isles as ‘allutterly barbares, without any sort or shew of civilitie’ in 1598,¹ Highlanders in general had been maligned as wild savages by a litany of writers.² Even more positive interpretations of these ingrained ideas, such as John Bellenden’s comment that the ‘Scottis in the Hieland’ were ‘maist sichty in craft of chevalrie’, reinforced the overall stereotype of Highland bellicosity.³ The image of the warlike Highlander was later cemented by the ‘Jacobite wars’ of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the service of the Highland regiments in the conflicts of the British Empire.⁴ Of all the epochs however, it is the sixteenth and early seventeenth century that holds the reputation as ‘the most turbulent and violent period of Highland history’,⁵ a view ostensibly supported by the title bestowed upon it by Gaelic tradition: ‘Linn nan Creach’ or the ‘Age of Forays’. The traditional narrative, repeated by modern historians, maintains that the collapse of the Lordship of the Isles around 1490-3 heralded ‘unusual chaos’ in the West Highlands and Isles throughout the sixteenth century.⁶

Despite the ancient association of war and warfare with the West Highlands and Isles, coupled with the infamous reputation of this specific period, there has been little attempt to examine the nature of military activity in the region in the late medieval and early modern period. Until very recently, there was a historiographical consensus (based upon a near-absence of scholarship) that warfare in the West Highlands and Isles was of

¹ James VI and I, ‘Basilikon Doron’, in *King James VI and I: selected writings*, eds Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards & Joseph Marshall (Ashgate, 2003), 222.

² Martin MacGregor, ‘Gaelic Barbarity and Scottish Identity in the Later Middle Ages’, in *Mìorun Mòr nan Gall, ‘The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander’?*, eds Dauvit Broun & Martin MacGregor (Glasgow, 2009), 7-48.

³ *The History and Chronicles of Scotland written in Latin by Hector Boece*, trans. John Bellenden, Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1821), xxvi.

⁴ Christopher Duffy, ‘The Jacobite Wars, 1708-46’, in *A Military History of Scotland*, eds Edward M. Spiers, Jeremy Crang, and Matthew Strickland (Edinburgh, 2012), 348-9; Stephen Brumwell, ‘The Scottish Military Experience in North America, 1756-83’, in *A Military History of Scotland*, 388-91, 394-7.

⁵ David Stevenson, *Highland Warrior: Alasdair MacColla and the Civil Wars* (Edinburgh, 1994), 21.

⁶ Ranald Nicolson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974), 548; Donald Gregory, *The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland* (1836, Edinburgh, 2008), 51-8, 86-113; Jenny Wormald, *Court, Kirk, and Community: Scotland 1470-1625* (Edinburgh, 1981), 39-40; Alexander Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland, 1306-1469* (Edinburgh, 1984), 220; James A. Stewart Jr., ‘War and Peace in the Hebrides: The Origin and Settlement of the “Linn nan Creach”’, in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 16/17 (1996/7), 116; *Campbell Letters 1559-1583*, ed. Jane E.A. Dawson (Edinburgh, 1997), 44; R.A. Dodgshon, *From Chiefs to Landlords: Social and Economic Change in the Western Highlands and Islands, c. 1493-1820* (Edinburgh, 1998), 11, 37-8, 102-3; Jane Dawson, ‘The Gaidhealtachd and the emergence of the Scottish Highlands’, in *British Consciousness and Identity: The Making of Britain, 1533-1707*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw & Peter Roberts (Cambridge, 1998), 266, 278; J.L. Roberts, *Feuds, Forays and Rebellions: History of the Highland Clans, 1475-1625* (Edinburgh, 1999), ix-xiv.

little historiographical importance, despite a general renaissance in the writing of military history in Scotland and Europe.⁷ Only in the last decade has there emerged any serious attempt to understand and analyse warfare in contemporary Highland society. By building upon this burgeoning research, this thesis aims to fill a gap in the historical record and demonstrate that warfare in the West Highlands and Isles is a theme worthy of study in its own right.

The Collapse of the Lordship of the Isles

The historiography of the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland in the late medieval and early modern periods has often been dominated by the MacDonald Lordship of the Isles. This can involve discussion of cultural life in the Lordship,⁸ or analysis of the political and military struggles between the Lordship and the Scottish crown during its heyday,⁹ but a particular focus has been on the period of its decline and eventual collapse between 1490 and 1493. 1490 saw the assassination of the main military leader in the Lordship, Aonghas Òg, son of Eoin, Lord of the Isles,¹⁰ and by 29 August 1493, Eoin himself was forfeited for the second and final time in James IV's so-called 'daunting of the Isles'.¹¹ The power vacuum caused by the forfeiture is the explanation most consistently offered by historians for the perceived instability and violence in the West Highlands and Isles that persisted throughout the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century.¹² In previous centuries, the centralised authority of the Lordship had ostensibly maintained stability and justice in the region. With its demise, many clans previously loyal to (or restrained by) the Lordship now competed fiercely to establish their own spheres of influence. Alexander Grant has stated that the Lordship period was a 'golden age in west-Highland history and Gaelic culture, between the turbulent thirteenth and sixteenth centuries'.¹³

⁷ 'Introduction: Developments in Late Medieval Military History and the Historiography of Anglo-Scottish Warfare', in *England and Scotland at War, c. 1296-c.1513*, eds Andy King & David Simpkin (Leiden, 2012), 1-19.

⁸ K.A. Steer and J.W.M. Bannerman, *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1977); *Acts of the Lords of the Isles, 1336-1493*, eds Jean Munro & R.W. Munro (Edinburgh, 1986).

⁹ J.W.M. Bannerman, 'The Lordship of the Isles', in *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. J. Brown (London, 1977), 209-40; Nicolson, *Scotland*, 541-9; Grant, *Independence*, 206-220.

¹⁰ *Highland Papers [HP]*, Vol.I ed. J. R. N. Macphail (Edinburgh, 1914), 52; *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol.II, eds Alexander MacBain & John Kennedy (Inverness, 1894), 162-3; Bannerman, 'The Lordship of the Isles: Historical Background', in *Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, 207.

¹¹ Eoin had previously been forfeited in 1475 for the so-called Westminster-Ardtornish treaty of 1462, in which he had agreed with Edward IV of England to 'harass the Scottish crown whenever possible'. See Bannerman, 'Lordship: Historical Background', 207.

¹² Nicolson, *Scotland*, 548; Grant, *Independence*, 220; Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 21; Roberts, *Feuds*, ix, 22-45; Alison Cathcart, *Kinship and Clientage: Highland Clanship 1451-1609* (Leiden, 2006), 34-5.

¹³ Grant, *Independence*, 211.

With the forfeiture as the main catalyst, the subsequent upheaval can be divided into two distinct phases. The first half of the sixteenth century saw the MacDonalds and their allies struggle to restore the Lordship of the Isles. Bannerman identified seven serious risings or rebellions before the ‘inhabitants of the Lordship finally accepted forfeiture’, a clear indication of the strong resistance felt towards the crown’s measures.¹⁴ The last uprising that openly aimed to restore the Lordship of the Isles was led by Dòmhnall Dubh, the grandson of Aonghas Òg, in 1544/5, and it received widespread support from clans within the Western Isles, including the MacDonalds of Clanranald, the MacLeods of Lewis, the MacLeods of Harris, and the MacLeans of Duart. Ultimately however, the rising ended in failure when Dòmhnall Dubh died of ‘a fever of five nights’ at Drogheda in Ireland in late 1545.¹⁵ Several historians have suggested that many clan chiefs had by this time begun to welcome the opportunities afforded by an absentee Lord of the Isles,¹⁶ and the typical interpretation of the second half of the sixteenth century is that of a clean break away from the Lordship, with clans consolidating their own powerbases by engaging in violent competition:

The different branches of the family of the Isles, and the other tribes inhabiting the Lordship, became gradually more estranged from each other, and more desirous each to extend its own power at the expense of its neighbours.¹⁷

It is generally accepted that this led to fairly continuous turbulence within the West Highlands and Isles, until the enactment of the Statutes of Iona in 1609 by the government of James VI and I successfully ‘pacified’ the clans.¹⁸

Since the 1970s, a significant reappraisal of the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles and its immediate aftermath has been conducted, viewed predominantly through the lens of MacDonald/crown relations. A new perspective emerged, spearheaded by John Bannerman and Norman Macdougall, that the forfeiture was an inevitable consequence of the MacDonalds’ over-extension of resources in holding the earldom of Ross,¹⁹ hastened by the incompetence of Eoin, the last lord.²⁰ Apart from Bannerman, relatively few

¹⁴ Bannerman, ‘Lordship: Historical Background’, 210.

¹⁵ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol.II, 166-7.

¹⁶ Gregory, *Western Highlands*, 179; Bannerman, ‘Lordship: Historical Background’, 213; Nicolson, *Scotland*, 548.

¹⁷ Gregory, *Western Highlands*, 180.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 332-3.

¹⁹ Bannerman, ‘Lordship: Historical Background’, 205-6.

²⁰ Norman Macdougall, *James III* (Edinburgh, 1982), 123-4; Norman Macdougall, ‘Achilles’ Heel? The Earldom of Ross, the Lordship of the Isles and the Stewart Kings’, in *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era*, eds E.J. Cowan & R.A. McDonald (East Linton, 2000), 249-50, 257, 275.

scholars tackled the aftermath of the forfeiture. Positioning 1493 as a terminus fits snugly into the general narrative of the expansion of crown authority in the late medieval period.²¹ Fresh perspectives have recently emerged on the consequences of the forfeiture in 1493. In 2006, Boardman argued that the Dòmhnall Dubh rising in 1502-6 was not a ‘nostalgic and essentially conservative’ attempt to restore the Lordship, but a protest against the ‘widespread displacement of established landowners and their dependents’ by the government.²² In 2014, Alison Cathcart challenged the idea that the forfeiture caused an immediate spike in lawlessness and violence, arguing instead that the MacDonalds remained a strong force of governance and stability.²³

The belief that the post-Lordship period was rife with disorder and rebellion played into a pernicious but widely repeated narrative (by Gordon Donaldson, for example) of the Highlands and Isles as peripheral, unruly, and existing in a state of constant violence.²⁴ Underlying this perspective is the ancient stereotype of the ‘wild’ Highlander, a regressive view that nevertheless still crops up in modern historiography on sixteenth-century Scotland. Otherwise accomplished scholars are not immune to its appeal,²⁵ which in its simplicity allows the circumvention of close examination of the region and its people. Monarchocentric studies in particular have a tendency to dismiss the region as a perpetually unruly area – a ‘problem’ for rulers to solve – with minimal consideration of an alternative Gaelic perspective. These views may have been influenced by the ‘new orthodoxy’ of Wormald and Grant in the 1970s, who challenged the idea that late medieval Scotland was an anarchic society.²⁶ They argued that ‘co-operation not conflict was the norm’ in the relationship between the crown and the nobility, downplaying the level of violence in Scotland to present a picture of stability.²⁷ The Highlands may not have conformed as readily to these models of stability, thereby perpetuating the notion that they were comparatively ‘wild’.

‘Linn nan Creach’

The period of ‘chaos’ known as ‘Linn nan Creach’, the ‘Age of Forays’, sharply contrasts

²¹ Nicolson, *Scotland*, 531-75.

²² Stephen Boardman, *The Campbells 1250-1513* (Edinburgh, 2006), 278-83, 311-7.

²³ Alison Cathcart, ‘A Spent Force?: The Clan Donald in the Aftermath of 1493’, in *The Lordship of the Isles*, ed. Richard Oram (Leiden, 2014), 254-70.

²⁴ Gordon Donaldson, *Scotland: James V-James VII* (Edinburgh, 1990), 13-14, 50-2.

²⁵ Pamela Ritchie, *Mary of Guise in Scotland, 1548-1560* (East Linton, 2002), 157, 167; Jamie Cameron, *James V: The Personal Rule, 1528-42* (East Linton, 1998), 335; Gervase Phillips, *The Anglo-Scots Wars: A Military History* (Woodbridge, 1999), 162-3.

²⁶ Grant, *Independence*; J.M. Brown, ‘The Exercise of Power’, *Scottish Society*, 33-65. Their model has been challenged by Brown. See Michael H. Brown, ‘Scotland Tamed?’, *Innes Review*, 45 (1994), 120-46.

²⁷ Brown, ‘Scotland Tamed?’, 123.

with ‘Linn an Àigh’, the ‘Age of Prosperity’, a supposed ‘Golden Age’ of stability and peace that existed in the West Highlands and Isles until the fall of the Lordship of the Isles.²⁸ It is not clear when either of these terms was first coined, and it is unlikely that they had any contemporary resonance in the sixteenth century. The former in particular was notably used by John MacInnes in 1981 to argue that Gaelic historical tradition possesses an ‘inherent strain of realism’ and does not simply view the past in a ‘golden glow’.²⁹ Since then the term ‘Linn nan Creach’ has been widely invoked in academic literature as shorthand for the alleged upsurge in violence in the West Highlands and Isles after 1490-3,³⁰ its relative popularity perhaps stemming from the fact that it seemingly corroborated the negative external view of the sixteenth-century Highlands. The term expresses something else beyond generalised anarchy, specifically a last ‘Heroic Age’.³¹ Although recognised by MacInnes, this dual meaning has more often been overlooked, and it suggests a more nuanced vision of this period, not defined solely by bloodshed and disorder but also by ‘heroic’ deeds.

Exacerbating these problems of provenance and interpretation is the fact that the temporal extent of ‘Linn nan Creach’ has been very loosely defined. As highlighted by Thomson, it can be used to vaguely describe ‘the age when centralized government had not properly succeeded in winning control over the Highland area’.³² Although the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493 is generally accepted as its beginning,³³ the end of the epoch is more contested, with termination points ranging from 1603-9 (with the ‘pacification’ of the region by James VI),³⁴ to as late as the battle of Culloden in 1746, thereby embracing the Wars of the Three Kingdoms and beyond.³⁵ Clan historians writing in the seventeenth century agree that the collapse of the Lordship of the Isles caused serious upheaval in the West Highlands and Isles, yet the duration of this unrest is left ambiguous. In the late seventeenth century, Hugh MacDonald, *seanchaidh* (historian) for

²⁸ Wilson McLeod, *Divided Gaels: Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland c. 1200-c.1650* (Oxford, 2004), 2, 62.

²⁹ John MacInnes, ‘Gaelic Poetry and Historical Tradition’, in *The Middle Ages in the Highlands*, ed. Loraine MacLean (Inverness, 1981), 142-63 at 161.

³⁰ *Campbell Letters*, 44, n.1; Stewart Jr., ‘War and Peace’; Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 15-6; Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word: The World of the Scottish Highlanders* (Edinburgh, 2009), 26; Gary J. West, ‘Scottish Military Music’, in *A Military History of Scotland*, 654; Maureen M. Meikle, *The Scottish People 1490-1625* (Raleigh, 2013), 12.

³¹ John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Birlinn, 2006), 52; Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 15-6.

³² Derick Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1989), 99.

³³ MacInnes, ‘Gaelic Poetry’, 161; Stewart Jr., ‘War and Peace’; *Campbell Letters*, 44, n.1; Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, ‘Highland Rogues and the Roots of Highland Romanticism’, in *Crossing the Highland Line*, ed. Christopher MacLachlan (Glasgow, 2009), 161-93 at 163; Meikle, *Scottish People*, 12.

³⁴ Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 20-1; Stewart Jr., ‘War and Peace’, 116.

³⁵ MacInnes, ‘Gaelic Poetry’, 161; MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 52-3; Thomson, *Gaelic Poetry*, 99.

Clan Donald of Sleat, memorably described the consequences of the assassination of Aonghas Òg, son of Eoin, last Lord of the Isles, in 1490:

...the Islanders, and the rest of the Highlanders, were let loose, and began to shed one another's blood. Although Angus kept them in obedience while he was sole lord over them, yet upon his resignation of his rights to the king, all families, his own as well as others, gave themselves up to all sorts of cruelties, which continued for a long time thereafter.³⁶

Thus with the death of Aonghas Òg, the true power behind the Lordship of the Isles by this time, a phase of intense, widespread inter-clan warfare was waged across the West Highlands and Isles. Yet how long did this violence last? Hugh MacDonald's statement of 'a long time thereafter' is extremely vague. Somewhat more precision is offered by Niall MacMhuirich in the 'Red Book of Clanranald', who implies that the disorder was reserved for the immediate period after the forfeiture, until the rising of Dòmhnall Dubh in 1544/5:

...re feadh na haimsire an rabha Domhnall Dubh ar laimh, do bhi buaighirt mor eadar Gaiodhealuibh ag dreim re cenas...

During the time that Donald Dubh had been in custody there was a great struggle among the Gael for power...³⁷

MacMhuirich goes on to relate the various struggles among the different branches of the Clan Donald, meaning that 'the Gael' refers solely to that clan. The eventual escape of Dòmhnall Dubh united these warring factions: 'the men of the Isles gathered about him'.³⁸ This suggests an alternative vision of the sixteenth century, in which 'Linn nan Creach' was specifically the fifty-year struggle to revive the Lordship of the Isles. It consequently ended with the death of the last serious claimant, Dòmhnall Dubh, in 1545. Neither Hugh MacDonald nor Niall MacMhuirich ever state that the sixteenth century as a whole was a time of 'cruelties' and 'great struggle'.

The West Highlands and Isles are not alone, even in Scotland, in bearing the burden of notoriety. In the Scottish Borders, the 300-year period spanning the commencement of the Wars of Independence in 1296 to the Union of the Crowns in 1603 was allegedly

³⁶ *HP*, Vol. I, 52.

³⁷ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 162-3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 162-7.

denoted as the ‘troublesome tymes’ by contemporaries.³⁹ Titles such as these invite modern audiences to view a historical epoch through a specific lens. While this may be warranted as reputations such as these are arguably not conjured out of thin air, they nevertheless distort the surviving evidence and, in this instance, predispose most historians to view the period as inherently and unprecedentedly tumultuous. Conversely, these titles imply that other periods were bereft of violent competition, which in the case of late medieval and early modern Scotland is clearly not accurate.⁴⁰

The Historiography of Warfare in the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland

First and foremost for our period, the lasting contribution of Donald Gregory’s *The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland from A.D. 1493 to A.D. 1625* must be highlighted. First published in 1836, it remains the cornerstone narrative of the West Highlands and Isles in this period. As observed by MacGregor, Gregory applied a ‘systematic’ and ‘rational’ approach to his sources, blending governmental records with genealogical histories to create a work with a ‘distinctly modern...flavour’.⁴¹ For this thesis, Gregory provides foundational narratives for the two case studies that bookend our period: *Blàr nan Lèine* (the ‘Battle of the Shirts’) in 1544, involving the Clanranald and the Frasers,⁴² and the ‘Islay Rising’ of 1615, led by the MacDonalds of Dunivaig.⁴³ Gregory’s *History* is not flawless. Given his stated intention was to trace the trajectory of the Scottish Highlander and Islander from ‘wild’ rebel to ‘loyal’ Jacobite, Gregory views the ‘civilising’ process enacted by the Stewart monarchs as intrinsically positive, no matter how much instability it created. At several points in his narrative, he slips into recounting the old stereotypes about the ‘wild’ nature of the Highlanders as a way of explaining contemporary behaviour, an approach that lacks depth and fails to reveal nuanced developments in society. Most pertinently, despite the fact that Gregory details numerous feuds and conflicts during his period, he never suspends his narrative to discuss the nature of this military activity.⁴⁴

³⁹ Christopher Brooke, *Safe Sanctuaries: Security and Defence in Anglo-Scottish Churches, 1296-1603* (Edinburgh, 2000), 12.

⁴⁰ Brown, ‘Scotland Tamed?’, 120-46.

⁴¹ Martin MacGregor, ‘Introduction’, in Gregory, *Western Highlands*, xi.

⁴² Gregory, *Western Highlands*, 157-163,

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 349-90.

⁴⁴ Arguably, this was outside the remit of *The History* and may have been addressed in his planned follow-up, a ‘dissertation on manners’ that was never completed due to his sudden death in October 1836, just seven months after the publication of *The History*. See MacGregor, ‘Introduction’, v, viii.

Historical coverage of the West Highlands and Isles between 1493 and 1625 can no longer be described, as Donald Gregory did in 1836, as ‘nearly...a perfect blank’.⁴⁵ In the wake of Gregory’s pioneering efforts, a crop of dedicated clan studies emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁶ Many of these works contain valuable insights and useful reprints of contemporary material, but their ‘genealogical tunnel-vision’ can occasionally prove untrustworthy.⁴⁷ Others lack the critical source analysis shown by Gregory and are generally limited to recitations of clan tradition about battles.⁴⁸ In more recent years, studies of political, linguistic, and cultural developments in the West Highlands and Isles have gone from strength to strength, through the work of Martin MacGregor, Aonghas MacCoinnich, Alison Cathcart, and Wilson McLeod. In addition, the research of Allan Macinnes and Robert Dodgshon has illuminated the long-term process of political and economic change undergone by the West Highlands and Isles from the fifteenth century onwards.⁴⁹

Despite the ever-growing scholarly interest in the West Highlands and Isles, the theme of warfare has been given relatively short shrift, perhaps due to a perception that it was unworthy of study. In 1979, Cowan dismissed the wars between the MacDonalds and MacLeans in the 1580s as ‘mutually suicidal bloodbaths...almost beyond the scope of historical investigation’.⁵⁰ This aversion to analysing warfare in the Highlands and Isles has allowed the perpetuation of misleading stereotypes which impede our overall understanding of contemporary society. For example, some historians have used isolated incidents of dubious provenance to make generalisations about warfare in the West Highlands and Isles. In his general history of Scotland, Smout adheres to the view that violence in the Highlands was much more extreme than elsewhere in Scotland, citing the ‘blood-curdling story’ of the massacre of Eigg in 1577, the slaughter of students from Dumbarton by the MacGregors after Glen Fruin in 1603, and the burning of the MacKenzie congregation at Kilchrist by MacDonald of Glengarry, also in 1603.⁵¹ There is good ground for believing that these incidents are apocryphal or at least greatly

⁴⁵ Gregory, *Western Highlands*, ii-iii.

⁴⁶ For some examples, see William Fraser, *The Chiefs of Colquhoun and Their Country*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1869); William Fraser, *The Chiefs of Grant*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1883); A. MacDonald & A. MacDonald, *The Clan Donald*, 3 vols. (Inverness, 1896-1904).

⁴⁷ Martin MacGregor, ‘A Political History of the Macgregors before 1571’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1989), 6.

⁴⁸ Alexander MacGregor, *The Feuds of the Clans* (Stirling, 1907); David N. Mackay, *Clan Warfare in the Scottish Highlands* (Paisley, 1922).

⁴⁹ Allan I. Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart, 1603-1788* (East Linton, 1996); Dodgshon, *Chiefs to Landlords*.

⁵⁰ Edward J. Cowan, ‘Clanship, Kinship and the Campbell Acquisition of Islay’, *SHR*, 58 (1979), 134.

⁵¹ T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (London, 1998), 96.

exaggerated.⁵² Smout offers no qualifying comments or contrasting examples in his summation of Highland warfare, leaving the reader with the impression that indiscriminate killing was the norm in the West Highlands and Isles.

Some scholars seem compelled to mould their evidence to fit the infamous reputation of the region and its people. An example is Keith Brown's *Bloodfeud in Scotland, 1573-1625* (1986), which has become a touchstone for scholars of the late medieval and early modern Scottish nobility. Following pioneering work by Wormald,⁵³ Brown investigated the phenomenon of feuding in noble culture across Scotland, and approached the West Highlands and Isles from within a broad Scottish framework. An important contribution made by Brown to the study of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles, which has received limited comment from historians,⁵⁴ is a statistic that measured regional variations in levels of feuding across Scotland. In *Bloodfeud*, Brown estimated that between 1573 and 1625 only 16% of feuds in Scotland took place in the Highlands (48 feuds in total), compared to 40% which occurred in the Lowlands (120 feuds in total).⁵⁵ Given the lurid reputation of the Highlander, particularly in this period, this comparatively low number appears to have surprised Brown, who is quick to qualify the statistic as potentially misleading:

...there may have been more feuds in the lowlands, but they were likely to be less violent, and to involve fewer people than highland feuds.⁵⁶

For Brown, the scale and quality of the violence in the Highlands was distinctive from the rest of the country. Brown argues that this statistical approach obscures qualitative data, resulting in a minor feud between two Fife lairds being 'equated with the long, wide-ranging and highly destructive feud between the MacDonald and MacLean clans'.⁵⁷ Yet this presents a false equivalence as the MacDonald-MacLean feud was a particularly extreme example of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles and cannot be considered

⁵² For Eigg, see Ross Crawford, 'The Massacre of Eigg in 1577', in *Proceedings for Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 8, ed. Wilson McLeod (Forthcoming); for Glen Fruin, see Chapter 6; for Kilchrist, see Aonghas MacCoinnich, "'His spirit was given only to warre": Conflict and Identity in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd c. 1580-c. 1630', in *Fighting for Identity: Scottish Military Experience c. 1550-1900*, eds S. Murdoch & A. MacKillop (Leiden, 2002), 157.

⁵³ Jenny Wormald, 'Bloodfeud, Kindred, and Government in Scotland', *Past and Present*, 87 (1980), 54-97.

⁵⁴ Dodgshon, *Chiefs to Landlords*, 87.

⁵⁵ Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 277.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

representative of a ‘typical’ conflict. Many were akin to his Lowland example.⁵⁸ Overall, despite Brown’s efforts to undermine the accuracy of his own statistics, he nevertheless provides a welcome reminder that violence and warfare in Scotland was not restricted to the West Highlands and Isles. As Dawson points out:

Attitudes were more important than realities, with the perceived gulf between the levels of violence much greater than the actual one.⁵⁹

What mattered more to contemporaries (and perhaps modern historians also) was not the violence itself, but *who* was perpetrating this violence. Unlike the work of Keith Brown, this thesis is not solely concerned with feuding society. Not all feuds involved warfare and not all warfare involved feuds. Some feuds were purely legal in nature, and the process of the feud can be defined less as a code of conduct and more as a ‘state of mind’.⁶⁰ That said, many of the case studies in this thesis do involve feuds either between separate clans or within an individual kindred, and research by Brown, Miller and others provides useful commentary particularly on noble society, honour culture, and legal mechanisms for reconciling feuds.

The military history of Scotland in general has been growing steadily in recent years, as signified by the release of *A Military History of Scotland* in 2012, and indeed *England and Scotland at War, c.1296-c.1513* in the same year.⁶¹ Other important research includes Gervase Phillips’ work on the wars between Scotland and England between 1513 and 1550,⁶² and Steve Murdoch’s reappraisal of Scotland as an early modern maritime power.⁶³ Some scholarship has assessed specific aspects of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles, such as weaponry,⁶⁴ or the use of the galley,⁶⁵ but the broader topic of warfare in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century has been neglected, often in favour of later

⁵⁸ For example, a serious feud over land inheritance between the Lamonts and MacLachlans in Cowal probably only resulted in the death of one man, Gilleasbuig Lamont of Stillaig (d. 1546). See *An Inventory of Lamont Papers 1231-1897*, ed. Sir Norman Lamont of Knockdow (Edinburgh, 1914), 54-7, 64; *AT*, IV, 195; *HP*, Vol. IV, 64; SA: GB224/PD60 [Bundle 899], 33, no. 96.

⁵⁹ *Campbell Letters*, 43-4.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 4; William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (London, 1990), 179-82.

⁶¹ Spiers et al., *A Military History of Scotland*; King & Simpkin, *England and Scotland at War*.

⁶² Gervase Phillips, ‘In the Shadow of Flodden: Tactics, Technology and Scottish Military Effectiveness, 1513-1550’, *SHR*, 77 (October, 1998), 162-82; Phillips, *Anglo-Scots Wars*; Phillips, ‘Scotland in the Age of the Military Revolution, 1488-1560’, in *A Military History of Scotland*, 182-208.

⁶³ Steve Murdoch, *The Terror of the Seas? Scottish Maritime Warfare, 1573-1713* (Leiden, 2010).

⁶⁴ David H. Caldwell, ‘Some Notes on Scottish Axes and Long Shafted Weapons’, in *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications 1100-1800*, ed. David H. Caldwell (Edinburgh, 1981), 253-314.

⁶⁵ Denis Rixson, *The West Highland Galley* (Edinburgh, 1998).

periods such as the War of the Three Kingdoms,⁶⁶ or the contemporary situation in Ireland. An important milestone in the latter case was Gerard Hayes-McCoy's *Scots Mercenary Forces in Ireland, 1565-1603* (1937), a study of the West Highland and Hebridean mercenary trade phenomenon from an Irish perspective.⁶⁷ Although it has been criticised in recent years by Kenneth Nicholls,⁶⁸ it nevertheless broke ground as the first concerted analysis of the military activities of the Scottish Gaelic warrior in Ireland in the sixteenth century. A recent collection of essays, *The World of the Galloglass* (2007), was envisioned as a modern successor to Hayes-McCoy's work.⁶⁹ Ultimately, the collection is a mixed success. Cathcart's study of James V's political intrigues in Ireland provides a fresh perspective although it barely features galloglasses,⁷⁰ and Caldwell's discussion of the military equipment of the West Highland warrior is a useful analysis and compendium of sources.⁷¹ Yet despite the fact that Hayes-McCoy's work is listed as a major influence, there is little discussion of mercenary activity in the second half of the sixteenth century, apart from some brief analysis in Edwards' interesting study of James Fullerton, a Scottish royal intelligence agent.⁷² The vital period c. 1595-1603, which saw the termination of this mercenary trade, went largely unexplored.

A methodological trend that attained considerable popularity in the twentieth century was to tackle Scotland and Ireland in tandem, as they were perceived to represent a homogenous pan-Gaelic zone.⁷³ This approach had some justification as the two countries shared certain cultural features, but it failed to account for the creative independence of both countries,⁷⁴ the very different political circumstances they faced, and perhaps, as argued by McLeod, the sense of division and separation felt by contemporary people from the two 'Gaeldoms'.⁷⁵ In a military context, this concept of a shared 'Celtic' tradition reached its nadir with James Hill's *Celtic Warfare* (1986), which examined Scotland and

⁶⁶ Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 6-33.

⁶⁷ Gerard Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces in Ireland, 1565-1603* (1906; reprinted, 1996).

⁶⁸ Kenneth Nicholls, 'Scottish mercenary kindreds in Ireland, 1250-1600', in *The World of the Galloglass*, ed. Seán Duffy (Dublin, 2007), 87.

⁶⁹ Duffy, *Galloglass*, xi.

⁷⁰ Alison Cathcart, 'James V, king of Scotland – and Ireland?', in Duffy, *Galloglass*, 124-43.

⁷¹ David Caldwell, 'Having the right kit: West Highlanders fighting in Ireland', in Duffy, *Galloglass*, 144-68.

⁷² David Edwards, 'Securing the Jacobean succession: the secret career of James Fullerton of Trinity College, Dublin', in Duffy, *Galloglass*, 188-219.

⁷³ Kenneth Jackson, *Common Gaelic: The Evolution of the Goidelic Languages* (London, 1951), 77; James Hill, *Celtic Warfare 1595-1763* (Edinburgh, 1986), 1-5; Steven G. Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule* (London, 1998), 250-4; Stephen G. Ellis, 'The Collapse of the Gaelic World, 1450-1650', *Irish Historical Studies*, 31 (1999), 449-69. For a discussion of this Gaelic 'culture-province' paradigm, see McLeod, *Divided Gaels*, 1-13.

⁷⁴ Donald E. Meek, 'The Gaelic Ballads of Medieval Scotland', *TGSI* 55, 47-72 at 68.

⁷⁵ McLeod, *Divided Gaels*, 194-222.

Ireland as interchangeable ‘Celtic’ states, both equally ‘primitive’ in military terms.⁷⁶ Hill presented the sixteenth-century Gaels on either side of the Irish Sea as analogous to the ‘ancient Celts’ who fought Julius Caesar, a notion that presents both Gaelic Scots and Gaelic Irish as frozen in time for over a millennium and a half.⁷⁷ Moreover, Hill only deigned to analyse the warfare of the Highlands and Isles of Scotland from the 1640s onwards, as only then did the tactical innovations ‘worked out in Ireland by Alasdair MacColla result in... a subtle but telling change in the Gaelic Scots’ military system’.⁷⁸ Thus the militarised population of the Highlands and Isles prior to the 1640s was stripped of personal agency and reduced to a mere footnote in history.

Direct challenges to Hill’s notions of ‘Celtic’ warfare have only emerged relatively recently. In 1998, Gervase Phillips criticised Hill for ‘arguing backwards from the tactics of eighteenth-century Jacobite armies’, although Phillips’ own analysis leans too heavily on genealogical histories and Lowland literati like Mair and Lesley.⁷⁹ The most considered challenge appeared in 2012 with Martin MacGregor’s article, ‘Warfare in Gaelic Scotland in the Later Middle Ages’, which appeared in *A Military History of Scotland* (2012). The Gaelic Irish mode of warfare, as interpreted by Katharine Simms,⁸⁰ was compared to the Scottish, with MacGregor concluding that while Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland ‘complemented’ each other, there was no ‘commonality of approach’ in warfare between the two. Another important breakthrough was the identification of an apparent intensification of warfare in the latter half of the sixteenth century, which may have culminated in a shift towards ‘total war’ around the turn of the seventeenth century. Overall, the nature of warfare was shown to be complex and far from ‘primitive’.⁸¹ Although this article has made a start in redressing the neglect shown to this theme, it seems fair to say that MacGregor has by no means answered, or presumed to answer, all the questions about warfare in the Highlands and Isles of Scotland. This thesis will build upon MacGregor’s broad overview with an expanded and deepened scope, which will allow his theories, as well as new interpretations, to be tested.⁸²

⁷⁶ Hill, *Celtic Warfare*, 1-5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁹ Phillips, ‘In the Shadow of Flodden’, 179-80.

⁸⁰ Simms, ‘Warfare in the Medieval Gaelic Lordships’, *The Irish Sword*, 12 (1975-6) 98-108; Simms, *From Kings to Warlords* (Woodbridge, 1987). See also Peter Harbison, ‘Native Arms and Armour in Medieval Gaelic Literature, 1170-1600’, *The Irish Sword* 12 (1975-6), 173-99, 270-84.

⁸¹ MacGregor, ‘Warfare in Gaelic Scotland in the Later Middle Ages’, in *A Military History of Scotland*, 209-31, at 211, 226-7.

⁸² The research of Aonghas MacCoinnich and Alison Cathcart has also provided fresh perspective. In 2002, MacCoinnich cogently observed that both internal and external contemporary sources conjure a warped picture of warfare, while highlighting the destabilising effect of state intervention in the Highlands and Isles.

For the historian laden with the baggage of centuries of bias against the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland, there can be a temptation to dismiss all claims of savagery and violence as the inevitable by-product of a prejudiced outlook. The approach of this thesis will be similar to that of Martin Martin, who, in the late seventeenth century, defended the reputation of the population of the Western Isles by pleading, ‘the Lion is not so fierce as he is painted’.⁸³ The implication is clear: the lion’s viciousness has been overstated yet he is still fierce. Some aspects of Gaelic warfare have been unduly exaggerated, but the sixteenth century was governed by a moral framework that may seem somewhat alien to modern audiences. For this thesis, simply replacing the stereotype of West Highland barbarity with an account of virtuous behaviour would be the trading of one artificial viewpoint for another. While also eschewing any notions of ‘wildness’ or primitivism as an explanation for modes of behaviour, this thesis aims to establish why contemporaries engaged in warfare.

Sources

The source base for the West Highlands and Isles in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century is richer than for any previous period, and this thesis will engage with a wide variety of different material. The three central source types utilised are governmental records, Gaelic poetry, and genealogical histories.⁸⁴

Scottish and English governmental records, such as the Privy Council, Privy Seal, and Great Seal, are essential sources for any political study of this period, and form the bedrock of the case studies included here. The first volumes of the *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland* and the *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland* coincide neatly with the start of our period (1545 and 1547 respectively). Many of these sources are printed and easily available, yet some remain surprisingly underused by historians of the Highlands, particularly the *State Papers* volumes. Like the other core sources of this thesis, governmental records come with caveats. Privy Council records, for example, present a centralised and often unsympathetic viewpoint of ‘problem’ areas in the West Highlands

In the same year, Cathcart argued that the militarisation of Gaelic society was so profound that the Clan Chattan struggled to escape the cyclical nature of feuding and warfare. See MacCoinnich, ‘Conflict and Identity’, 133-162; Alison Cathcart, ‘Crisis of Identity? Clan Chattan’s response to government policy in the Scottish Highlands, c. 1580-1609’, in Murdoch & MacKillop, *Fighting For Identity*, 163-184.

⁸³ Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, (Edinburgh, 1981), 345.

⁸⁴ Beyond these sources, various archives and libraries across Scotland hold collections of original documentary material often relating to a specific clan, which provide a strong foundation of contemporary evidence. These can contain evidence including bonds of manrent or friendship, charters, sasines, and contracts, which allow the historian to construct patterns of land-holding and political affiliation.

and Isles, and for many conflicts – political and/or military – only include the perspective of one party. Additionally, the number of reported incidents from the 1590s onwards far outstrips previous decades, especially in comparison to the ‘artificially low’ number during the Marian Civil War.⁸⁵ Rather than representing a genuine upsurge in disorder, this may instead reflect increased government interest, an especially pertinent point in ‘problem’ areas like the Highlands and Borders, the former of which became a target for plantation and expropriation. As the eye of royal government became more fixated upon the West Highlands and Isles, the administrative machine documented pacification efforts in detail, weighting evidence towards the period c. 1590-1615 and providing a potentially misleading impression of the intensity of disorder. Alternatively, this increase in documentation may reflect a demonstrable shift towards ‘total war’ in the West Highlands and Isles around the turn of the seventeenth century, as posited by MacGregor.⁸⁶ For historians, a positive result of this upsurge of data between c. 1590-1615 is the creation of a rich evidence base that cannot be matched by earlier periods. Within this 25-year period, a pinnacle is reached in the documentation of the Irish mercenary trade in the Western Isles between 1594-6, which contains unique information about elite attitudes towards warfare, and the scope and composition of armies in the West Highlands and Isles. Diplomatic records from around this time provide some of our best insight from Highlanders and Hebrideans in their own words (in Scots if not Gaelic), with personal correspondence from chiefs like the Campbell earls of Argyll or Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart. In addition, the government began to order reports in Scots from Gaelic informants like Dioness Campbell, the Dean of Limerick, a cousin of the earl of Argyll, which offer fresh perspectives on military matters in the Western Isles.

The second key source type for this thesis is Gaelic poetry, by some distance the main source through which the historian can glean insight from inhabitants of the Highlands and Isles in their own language. A central feature of Gaelic poetry was the ‘panegyric code’, a term first coined by John MacInnes.⁸⁷ This was a collection of stock motifs of recognisable meaning to the audience that served to reinforce the rule of the patron.⁸⁸ These rhetorical conventions can seem obscure to modern audiences and often should not be taken literally, but they nevertheless contain crucial insight into the values of contemporary society. Warfare and militarism were crucial points of reference within the

⁸⁵ Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 5.

⁸⁶ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 211.

⁸⁷ MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 265-319.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*; M. Pía Coira, *By Poetic Authority: The Rhetoric of Panegyric in Gaelic Poetry of Scotland to c. 1700* (Edinburgh, 2010), 3, 26-36.

poetic repertoire, as common motifs included the praising of a chief's weapons and armoury, as well as his skill as a warrior.⁸⁹ Heroic ballads meanwhile drew upon Irish myth and history to present a worldview that highly venerated martial exploits, thus potentially encouraging patterns of warlike behaviour.⁹⁰ Throughout the sixteenth century, the increasing use of the Scottish Gaelic vernacular saw the emergence of new forms of expression in poetry in terms of metre and language,⁹¹ and as early as the 1560s, vernacular poets began including references to new weaponry, like firearms, which reflect the changing trends of that place and time.⁹² Some scholars have cautioned against 'overinterpreting' poetry, i.e. accepting 'isolated statements' as definite proof of contemporary attitudes and outlooks.⁹³ This is perhaps even more pertinent in Scotland as the surviving evidence is somewhat sparse: in comparison to Ireland where nearly 2,000 bardic poems survive, only around 160 items of bardic poetry from Scotland have been discovered, and more than half date from the period 1450-1550, due in large part to the survival of *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*.⁹⁴ Other scholars, whilst remaining conscious of this potential pitfall, have nevertheless demonstrated the value of poetry as a source, an approach that this thesis will emulate. In an Irish context, Katharine Simms used poetry to reveal the overarching military ethos of medieval Gaelic Irish society, before tracing a gradual transition towards the celebration of civility as private war receded in the seventeenth century.⁹⁵ In a Scottish context, Martin MacGregor has demonstrated that poetry is an historical artefact laden with contemporary detail that can deepen and corroborate other documentary evidence.⁹⁶

Another key set of sources for this thesis are genealogical histories, which have been relatively neglected by historians. Although MacGregor has identified 'nearly fifty' of these texts,⁹⁷ few have been incorporated into modern studies, mainly due to their

⁸⁹ Coira, *Poetic Authority*, 351-62.

⁹⁰ D.E. Meek, 'The corpus of heroic verse in the Book of the Dean of Lismore' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Glasgow, 1982); Meek, 'Gaelic Ballads', 48, 59-68.

⁹¹ Thomson, *An Introduction*, 19-98; *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, ed. Colm Ó Baoill, trans. Meg Bateman (Edinburgh, 1994), 19-33.

⁹² William J. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig: Gaelic Poetry 1550-1900* (Inverness, 1976), 243; Ronald I.M. Black, 'Some Poems from W.J. Watson's Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig' (Edinburgh, 1996), 14-15, 17.

⁹³ McLeod. *Divided Gaels*, 109.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-6, 108-9.

⁹⁵ Simms, 'Images of Warfare in Bardic Poetry', *Celtica* 21 (1990), 608-19; Simms, 'Warfare in the Medieval Gaelic Lordships', 98-108; Simms, 'Bardic Poetry as a Historical Source', in *The Writer as Witness: literature as historical evidence*, ed. Tom Dunne (Cork, 1987), 58-75.

⁹⁶ Martin MacGregor, "'Surely one of the greatest poems ever made in Britain": the lament for Griogair Ruadh MacGregor of Glen Strae and its historical background', in *The Polar Twins*, eds E.J. Cowan & D. Gifford (Edinburgh, 1999), 114-53.

⁹⁷ Martin MacGregor, 'The genealogical histories of Gaelic Scotland', in *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain, 1500-1850*, eds Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf (Manchester, 2002), 199.

reputation for unreliability. These texts have three key drawbacks as sources. Firstly, they are partisan texts (often avowedly so)⁹⁸ that champion the specific clan to which the author belonged or with which he was associated, and therefore can distort events to present the favoured clan in a more flattering light. Secondly, although these histories may have used earlier sources, both written and oral, from the medieval and late medieval periods, they were generally written much later, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹⁹ Therefore, some of these histories were committed to writing literally hundreds of years after the events they purport to relate. The third problem also deals with provenance, as some of these texts underwent a series of recensions or were highly interrelated, resulting in the recycling of material.¹⁰⁰ Despite these issues, William Matheson recognised that genealogical histories should not be wholly discounted, and his work on the traditions of the MacKenzies initiated the ‘rehabilitation’ of genealogical histories as historical sources,¹⁰¹ a process followed by a number of other scholars, including John Bannerman,¹⁰² David Sellar,¹⁰³ Steve Boardman,¹⁰⁴ and Martin MacGregor.¹⁰⁵

Reconciling these disparate and often contradictory sources is challenging but essential. A narrow outlook on sources, based solely on governmental records for example, would produce a one-sided picture of the West Highlands and Isles to the prejudice of clans engaging in military activity. Adopting a more inclusive approach broadens and deepens our understanding of the time period, and can be a rewarding exercise in its own right. This thesis will demonstrate that analysing a genealogical history in tandem with contemporary documentary material can ‘inspire confidence’ in the former source,¹⁰⁶ and bring us closer to the reality of a specific internecine conflict.¹⁰⁷ Only engagement with a broad array of sources can reveal the realities of warfare in contemporary society.

Scope and Structure of Enquiry

War is defined by *Oxford Dictionaries* as ‘a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country’.¹⁰⁸ Warfare meanwhile has been defined as

⁹⁸ *HP*, Vol. I, 11-13, 15, 23, 59-60, 63-5; MacGregor, ‘Genealogical histories’, 223.

⁹⁹ MacGregor, ‘Genealogical histories’, 196, 209-11.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁰¹ William Matheson, ‘Traditions of the MacKenzies’, *TGSI*, 39-40 (1942-50), 193-228.

¹⁰² Bannerman, ‘Lordship of the Isles’, 209-40.

¹⁰³ ‘Highland Family Origins – Pedigree Making and Pedigree Faking’, in MacLean, *Middle Ages in the Highlands*, 103-17.

¹⁰⁴ ‘The Tale of Leper John and the Campbell Acquisition of Lorn’, in *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era*, eds E.J. Cowan and R. Andrew McDonald (East Linton, 2000), 219-47.

¹⁰⁵ MacGregor, ‘Genealogical histories’, 196-239.

¹⁰⁶ Matheson, ‘Traditions’, 195.

¹⁰⁷ *Infra*: 147-52.

¹⁰⁸ *Oxford Dictionaries* <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/war>>

‘engagement in or the activities involved in war or conflict’.¹⁰⁹ These loose definitions clearly embrace a wide array of military activity. This thesis predominantly focuses on inter-clan warfare (i.e. warfare between separate clans) and internecine warfare (i.e. warfare within an individual clan) in the West Highlands and Isles. Attention will also be given to the clans’ mercenary campaigns in Ireland, the Scottish government’s military interventions in the West Highlands and Isles, and the contribution of Highland soldiers to Scottish royal armies. A wide spectrum of warfare was conducted by clans, ranging from a handful of armed men rustling cattle from their neighbour to large-scale pitched-battles and sieges involving hundreds of heavily armed warriors. All of these various modes of warfare will be analysed. By necessity a study of warfare focuses on times of upheaval and violence. Times of peace are perhaps harder to quantify and analyse simply because many of our sources are often confined to disturbances ‘with little record of any outbreak of peace’.¹¹⁰ An effort will be made to draw attention where possible to periods of apparent peace as a reminder that this was not a period of perpetual bloodshed.

The geographical focus of this study is the West Highlands and Isles, i.e. the Inner and Outer Hebrides. On the mainland, the geographical extent of this study stretches from Fortrose north-east of Inverness down through Ross and Cromarty, the Great Glen and the Grampian Mountains, with the most southerly areas embracing Loch Lomond and the Lennox, Cowal, Bute, and the peninsula of Kintyre. The eastern extent of this thesis roughly follows the Great Glen, although the lands of some relevant clans, notably the Frasers, lay on the eastern side of this natural fault-line.

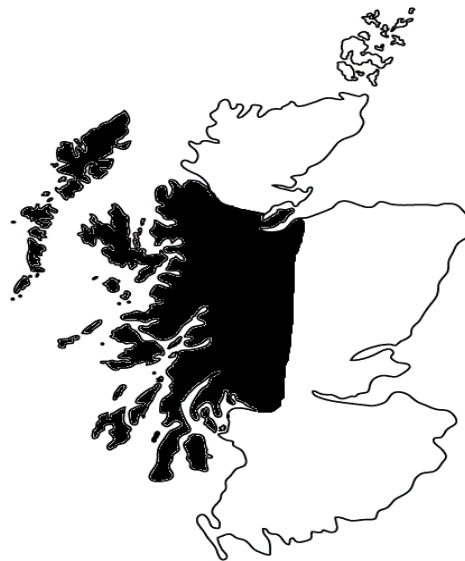


Figure 1: Approximate area of study

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/warfare>>

¹¹⁰ Anna Groundwater, *The Scottish Middle March, 1573-1625* (Woodbridge, 2010), 9.

The people that inhabited this swathe of land were predominantly Gaelic-speaking (or, like their clan chiefs, bilingual in Gaelic and Scots).¹¹¹ This thesis will avoid using the term ‘Gàidhealtachd’ to describe the geographical extent covered, as this technically includes areas in the south-west of Scotland, such as Carrick and Galloway, which remained Gaelic-speaking in the sixteenth century.¹¹²

The temporal parameters of this thesis, c. 1544-1615, have been chosen for a number of reasons. Most pertinently, the increasing richness of evidence from c. 1544 onwards makes this a natural starting point. Yet it is undoubtedly significant that these parameters coincide with two events that have both been interpreted as a ‘final’ attempt to revive the Lordship of the Isles: the Dòmhnall Dubh rising of 1544/5,¹¹³ and the ‘Islay Rising’ of 1615.¹¹⁴ Although the Lordship and the MacDonalds do not dominate this thesis, an important theme in our case studies (particularly Chapters 7 and 9) is the extent to which the influence of the Lordship of the Isles continued through the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

The first part of this thesis will consider a series of interlinked themes that trace the overall process of warfare across four thematic chapters. Chapter 1 will explore the mental world inhabited by the Gaelic elite as well as martial culture more generally, with assessment of the roles of a chief, honour, military leadership, martial recreation, and the role of castles. Chapter 2 assesses the causation of warfare, which will emphasise that conflict generally involved an array of contingent and interconnected catalysts. Chapter 3 focuses on soldiers and armies, covering the recruitment, composition, and supply of the latter, as well as the military equipment used by the former. Chapter 4 analyses more closely the conduct of warfare, with consideration of fundamentals such as the nature of raiding, battles, and sieges, while also assessing more specific issues such as the part played by Highland Scots in royal armies. Although the reconciliation process will not be tackled in a standalone chapter, it will be a recurrent theme in the case studies. These will illustrate that warfare in the Highlands was not continuous, nor was the region a lawless ‘frontier’. It had its own local mechanisms for mediation and arbitration that were often more effective than those imposed by central government.

¹¹¹ A. MacCoinnich, ‘Where and how was Gaelic written in late medieval and early modern Scotland? Orthographic practices and cultural identities’, *SGS*, 24 (2008), 315-7, 320-2.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 315.

¹¹³ Bannerman, ‘Lordship: Historical Background’, 210.

¹¹⁴ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 222.

After examining these themes, the second part of this thesis focuses on a series of case studies to demonstrate the diverse experience of different clans in the West Highlands and Isles. These case studies span a 71-year period c. 1544-1615, beginning with a study of the Clanranald from 1544-1577 and concluding with the ‘Islay Rising’ of 1614-15. They have been carefully chosen to obtain a balance of clans, localities, types of conflict, and chronology across the period. A broad sweep of different clans will be included, not only as a means of countering the partisanship of clan histories,¹¹⁵ but also to determine the extent to which there was a uniform approach to warfare across the West Highlands and Isles. Due to their enduring prominence even after the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles, the MacDonalds have often stood as proxy for the entire West Highlands and Isles, to the consequent neglect of other important clans.¹¹⁶ The MacDonalds remain a key clan for this thesis (mainly the branches of Sleat, Clanranald, and Dunivaig), yet equally important are other Highland heavyweights, like the Campbells of Argyll, the Campbells of Glenorchy, the MacLeans of Duart, the MacLeods of Harris, the MacNeills of Barra, and the MacGregors. The net has been cast even further to include other, often neglected clans, such as the Camerons of Lochiel in Lochaber and the Colquhouns of Luss in the Lennox. These clans provide a counter balance to the MacDonalds, allowing broader representation of the West Highlands and Isles.

Perhaps the most notable exclusion is the conflict between the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the MacLeans of Duart, which originally raged in the 1580s and later flared up again at the battle of Traigh Ghruinneart in 1598. This thesis is not intended to be an exhaustive record of every inter-clan conflict in this period, but more importantly this particular feud has recently been covered in detail by Maclean-Bristol.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, this feud, especially its climax in 1598, has important ramifications for both the case study of the MacDonald/MacLeod feud in 1601 and the theme of conduct, and will be analysed from these perspectives.

Variation exists in any large-scale project and should be embraced rather than moulded to fit a general pattern of ‘Gaelic warfare’. Our case studies offer a chance for these variables to emerge with greater clarity. Moreover, analysing instances of warfare and conflict in isolation from their political background can result in the violence

¹¹⁵ MacGregor, ‘Political history’, 6.

¹¹⁶ Boardman, *Campbells*, 4-6; MacCoinnich, ‘Where and how was Gaelic written?’, 318; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 39.

¹¹⁷ Nicholas MacLean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust: The Crimes and Death of Sir Lachlan Mor MacLean of Duart, 1558-1598* (East Linton, 1999), 238-52.

appearing irrational, unjustified, or 'wild'. All of the case studies in this thesis involve a discussion of the political background to acts of war, a crucial step for understanding the kinds of pressures faced by contemporaries and why they would resort to violence. Rarely was there a sudden lurch towards bloodshed, and in the vast majority of cases there was a long process of political conflict before any violence took place.

By taking a systematic approach towards warfare in the West Highlands and Isles between 1544 and 1615, this thesis will analyse how and why military activity took place. It will contend that warfare did not dominate society, as has been previously thought, but it was nevertheless an important facet of clan life. Moreover, it will challenge the idea that the sixteenth century was a time of uninhibited 'chaos', arguing instead that warfare was conducted sparingly, towards precise objectives, and with a high degree of restraint.

Part 1: The Process of War

Chapter 1: Mentalities and Martial Culture

The West Highlands and Isles have recently been portrayed as a ‘frontier’ society that ‘promoted martial cultures’ and militarism at a level that outstripped the norm in Scotland, apart from perhaps the Borders.¹ Even a superficial analysis of contemporary sources indicates that there is some truth to this view, but as highlighted by Allan MacInnes there is a danger in portraying the Highlands as a purely ‘martial’ culture defined by an all-encompassing ‘military ethos’.² Across late medieval and early modern Europe, nobles and kings shared a ‘common value system in which military prowess was prized’.³ The Highlands were no different in this regard, and like elsewhere, military pursuits did not dictate every aspect and stratum of society. This chapter will assess Gaelic perceptions of warfare and martial culture through extensive use of contemporary poetry, letters, diplomatic correspondence, and genealogical histories. It will be shown that warfare was not a chief’s *raison d’être*, but a necessary aspect of his overarching responsibility to protect his clan. Militaristic imagery was nevertheless central to a chief’s self-identity and buttressed by very real expectations about his participation and leadership in military affairs.

1.1: Role of the Chief: Warrior or Protector?

The arresting visuals of late medieval sculpture provide a clear indication of the martial culture that underpinned elite society in the West Highlands and Isles. Effigies and graveslabs frequently depict men in armour clutching two-handed swords to their chest, or swords suspended as a decorative centrepiece. Other symbols of military power include axes, bows and arrows, spears, galleys, and castles.⁴ The heyday of craftsmanship and patronage coincided with the temporal parameters of the Lordship of the Isles, but sculptural tradition continued into the sixteenth century.⁵ This reflects a highly militarised society, perhaps ‘consciously different’ from Lowland societal norms.⁶ The crucial point here is that the male clan elite wanted to be portrayed – in life and to posterity – as warriors.

¹ Brown, *Noble Power*, 121; Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 277.

² MacInnes, *Clanship*, 30.

³ Frank Tallett and D.J.B. Trim “‘Then was then and now is now’: an overview of change and continuity in late-medieval and early-modern warfare”, in *European Warfare, 1350-1750* (Cambridge, 2010), 13.

⁴ The latter two examples also symbolise the maritime lordship of the region.

⁵ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 22-9, 167-72, 180-4.

⁶ David Caldwell, ‘The Lordship of the Isles: Identity through Materiality’, in Oram, *Lordship of the Isles*, 252.



Figure 2: Effigy from Kilninian Church, Mull (Canmore)

The fact that the suspended sword, the central design of many sculptures, could act as a visual representation of the chief himself chimes with the recurrent motif in poetry that the sword was an extension of his hand and power.⁷ The widespread adherence to the decorative style of the warrior-chief on effigies throughout the West Highlands could merely represent observance of tradition, or even the current trend, but nevertheless, it must be assumed that the sculptures represent both the weight of societal expectation and the idealised persona of individual chiefs.

Even richer insight into contemporary attitudes towards warfare is preserved within the stanzas of Gaelic poetry. Generally composed with the intent of flattering the aristocratic patron, these poems often praised martial skill and valour, drawing from the pool of motifs known as the ‘panegyric code’.⁸ Although these poems could be formulaic in nature, they present a consistent vision of the specific military qualities held in esteem

⁷ *Scottish Verse*, 102-3, 110-1, 107-13; *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 234-5; *Eachann Bacach and other Maclean poets*, ed. Colm Ó Baoill (Edinburgh, 1979), 3, 5; MacGregor, ‘The Lament’, 140. It is worth noting that the sword design was not a unique feature of Highland monumental sculpture and was found elsewhere in Britain and Europe.

⁸ MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 265-319.

by elite society.⁹ Each individual chief may not necessarily have deserved such adulation, but poetry continually reinforced praiseworthy qualities and thereby established aspirational benchmarks in moral and physical character. Consequently, they may have had a direct influence on chiefly behaviour both on and off the battlefield, acting as a catalyst for self-actualisation as a warrior-chief. Gaelic chiefs wanted to leave behind a heroic legacy, for their deeds to be remembered long after their death. One of the primary appeals of poetry was that it offered a form of immortality, as stated in an elegy for the Clanranald chief Ailean MacRuaidhrí (d. c. 1509):

...gé fíor t'ég, is tú nach teasda:
féach do chló budh dheasda ad dhiaidh.

...though true your death, you have not departed;
behold, your renown lives on.¹⁰

Attainment of such a legacy depended on their ability to emulate and surpass their own ancestors. Irish myth and history also provided a number of role-models, and the general frame of reference of Scottish Gaelic poetry was 'Hibernocentric'.¹¹ On both sides of the Irish Sea, chiefs were flatteringly compared to mythical or early historical figures, like Fionn mac Cumhaill or Cú Chulainn, to underline their military prowess and overall worthiness to rule. These figures were adopted by some clans as their progenitors: the MacDonalds for example claimed descent from Colla Uais, a legendary High King of Ireland.¹² Not all of these heroes were remembered for military exploits: the early king of Connacht, Guaire Aidne mac Colmáin, was most renowned for his 'legendary generosity'.¹³

This Irish frame of reference persisted well into the sixteenth century and beyond,¹⁴ as related by John Carswell (c.1522-1572), bishop of the Isles. In *Foirm na n-urrnuidheadh* ('The form of the prayers'), a Gaelic translation of the 1564 edition of the Book of Common Order published in Edinburgh in April 1567, Carswell includes an epistle to his patron the Earl of Argyll, which claims the

⁹ MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 265-319.

¹⁰ *Duannaire na Sracaire/Songbook of the Pillagers*, ed. Wilson McLeod, trans. Meg Bateman (Edinburgh, 2007), 208-9; *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 224-5.

¹¹ McLeod, *Divided Gaels*, 113-117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 116-117; Páa Coira, *By Poetic Authority*, 58.

¹³ McLeod, *Divided Gaels*, 116.

¹⁴ Colm Ó Baoill, 'Some Irish Harpers in Scotland', *TGSI*, 47 (1971-2), 143-166.

...composers and writers and patrons of Gaelic...prefer and are accustomed to maintain and improve the vain hurtful worldly tales composed about the Tuatha Dé Danann, and about the sons of Milesius, and about the heroes and Fionn mac Cumhaill with his warriors...¹⁵

The continuing popularity of these stories is notable in itself, but the desire to ‘maintain and improve’ them is even more important as it suggests that Irish archetypes were not repeated verbatim. Ireland was not always the ‘centre and the innovator’ and Scottish Gaelic literati were engaged in a continual process of adaptation and evolution.¹⁶ The popularity of certain genres differed on either side of the Irish Sea, as shown by the proportionally higher number of elegies in Scottish heroic poetry, which, as Donald Meek suggests, may have reflected the ‘spirit of the age’ with a ‘renewed interest in warrior elegy and the concept of a lost Golden Age’ in the wake of the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles.¹⁷ In contrast, MacGregor has suggested that the heroic ballads in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, rather than acting as a call to arms, may in fact commemorate the ‘passing of a heroic age’ in the wake of the battle of Flodden in 1513, an event that ‘shook and scarred’ the Clan Campbell.¹⁸

Warfare is rarely described in extended detail in any individual poem. Martial motifs are liberally diffused throughout the bardic corpus, yet they generally do not dominate the praise of chiefs and are invoked alongside other esteemed qualities.¹⁹ Pià Coira’s analysis of Scottish panegyric poetry provides an overview of the various qualities that a chief was expected to possess:

...the rightful king or chief, must be of noble ancestry, an accomplished warrior, one capable of exacting rent and tribute, of uniting and protecting his people, and of maintaining the peace in his territory. He is also physically attractive, devout, and generous to strangers, to the poor and most of all to men of learning. His house is vibrant with feasting and gaming, he is a bountiful patron of learning, and beloved

¹⁵ *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh: John Carswell’s Gaelic translation of the Book of Common Order*, ed. R.L. Thomson (Edinburgh, 1988), 10-11, 179.

¹⁶ Martin MacGregor, ‘Creation and Compilation: *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* and Literary Culture in Late Medieval Gaelic Scotland’, in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: From Columba to the Union (until 1707)*, eds Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Murray Pittock, and Susan Manning (Edinburgh, 2007), 214.

¹⁷ Meek, ‘The corpus of heroic verse’, 129.

¹⁸ MacGregor, ‘The View from Fortingall’, 68.

¹⁹ An exception is perhaps the elegy for Ruairidh Mór MacLeod of Harris (d. 1626) which lists his military campaigns in Ireland in the form of a *caithréim* (‘battle-career’). See John MacDonald, ‘An elegy for Ruaidhri Mór’, *SGS*, 8 (1955-8), 27-52; Simms, *From Kings*, 172; Simms, ‘Images of Warfare’, 616.

of women. He is often said to have been foretold by prophets of old...and he is celebrated by nature with clement weather and fertility through the land.²⁰

Martial prowess therefore was just one attribute of many for the ideal clan chief. Assuming that Coira's overview represents a hierarchy of importance, military skill is clearly given a high position, yet it may be outshone by a noble ancestry, identified by McLeod as perhaps the 'single most important source of prestige for a Gaelic ruler'.²¹ It is also notable that the two 'central preoccupations' of *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* are the 'the Argument about Women' and the kingship of the Scots, not militarism and warfare.²² If the *Book* is accepted as a reflection of the interests and concerns of the elite around the time of its compilation between 1512 and 1542, then the intellectual range of the Gaelic nobility of the Highlands was diverse and clearly not confined to military affairs.²³

The poetic motif perhaps most closely related to martial prowess is the expectation that a chief should be a prime physical specimen. The attainment of physical perfection reinforced the chief's role as a warrior and traditionally it was held that even a minor physical disability could be an insurmountable barrier to leadership.²⁴ John MacInnes has pointed out however that several famous and successful chiefs were given designations that conveyed physical infirmities, such as *crotach* (humpbacked), *bacach* (lame), or *cam* (squint-eyed), which could instead suggest that 'bodily perfection', and by extension martial prowess, were not quintessential elements for the legitimacy of a chief.²⁵ However, this seems overly simplistic for several reasons. Firstly, we cannot be sure when these chiefs were given these nicknames, and they may have originally been intended as insults that gained traction in later tradition. Secondly, if we accept that these chiefs did indeed possess these physical 'defects', it is important to consider when in their life they acquired them. For example, according to the 'History of the MacDonalds', Alasdair Crotach MacLeod of Harris was imprisoned in Castle Tioram for seven years, where 'he got his back broke which made him hunch backed all his lifetime'.²⁶ This suggests that Alasdair was not 'hunch backed' from birth and originally inherited the chiefship while in prime physical condition, before suffering an injury later in life at a stage when his position had

²⁰ Pía Coira, 'Kingship imagery in Classical Gaelic panegyric for Scottish chiefs', in *Cànan & Cultar / Language & Culture Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 3, eds Wilson McLeod, James E. Fraser and Anja Gunderloch (Edinburgh, 2006), 39.

²¹ McLeod, *Divided Gaels*, 115-6.

²² MacGregor, 'Creation and Compilation', 216-7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 210, 213-7.

²⁴ Simms, *From Kings*, 49-51.

²⁵ John MacInnes, 'Clan Unity and Individual Freedom', *TGSI*, 47 (1971-2), 343-6; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 62-3.

²⁶ *HP*, Vol. I, 68.

already been secured. Thirdly, it seems conceivable that if a chief sustained an injury in battle these epithets could have been regarded as a badge of honour, proof that he had defended his clan and shed blood in the line of duty. Finally, these particular ‘defects’, a humpback for example, may not have been so debilitating as to prevent the chief from performing his military role.²⁷ Despite these qualifications, MacInnes’ core point still stands: the physical ideal of poetry did not always align with reality, and physical perfection was not an absolute requirement for clan chiefs.

Perhaps another reason that these physically impaired individuals remained chief of their clan was because they could still fulfil another responsibility, probably the most central responsibility of them all. Protection of kin and land has been identified by several scholars as the primary duty of a clan chief.²⁸ Military prowess was an admirable and even necessary trait for a clan chief, yet arguably of little worth if it could not be exercised in the protection of the clan. A description of the inauguration of the Lords of the Isles by Hugh MacDonald of Sleat notes that at the final part of the ceremony the new lord was presented with his

... forefather’s sword, or some other sword, signifying his duty was to protect and defend them [the clan] from the incursions of their enemies in peace or war, as the obligations and customs of his predecessors were.²⁹

What is most striking about this passage is that the sword does not symbolise the Lord as a simple warrior. Instead, the Lord must be prepared to use his skill as a warrior to protect his people, a responsibility underscored by the allusion to his ancestors’ successful defence of the clan. It is unknown if this same ritual was observed by individual clans before and after the dissolution of the Lordship of the Isles, but the duty of protection was undoubtedly given primacy. Although the Statutes of Iona of 1609 forbade the use of firearms in the Western Isles (apart from in domestic and hunting contexts), clan chiefs and their immediate retinues were still permitted to wear arms and armour, an acknowledgement by the government of a chief’s right and responsibility to protect his people and lands.³⁰

²⁷ My thanks to Brian Brennan for discussing this point with me.

²⁸ Simms ‘Images of Warfare’, 608; *Campbell Letters*, 12-3; MacInnes, *Clanship*, 2-3; MacGregor, ‘The Lament’, 120; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 62-3.

²⁹ *HP*, Vol. I, 24.

³⁰ Martin MacGregor, ‘The Statutes of Iona: text and context’, *Innes Review*, 57 (2006), 148; MacInnes, *Clanship*, 65.

An illuminating example of the nature of protection is provided by the feud between the Campbells and the MacGregors in mid-to-late sixteenth century. Following a MacGregor raid in August 1570, Cailean Campbell of Glenorchy implored the earl of Argyll to demonstrate his ability to protect (and avenge) his own kinsmen:

For gif your Lordship rememberis rycht an quhen thair was maist familiaritie betuix your Lordship and me and maist plesand promesses maid to me be your Lordship I and my puir aneis [only] soun thairefter sustenit grettest skayth. Prayinge your Lordship haist your Lordshipis ansuer to me quhat ye will do in revenge of this caus that I ma tak the nixt best thairefter as God gevis me grace.³¹

Although quick to remind his chief of his responsibilities, Campbell of Glenorchy had his own duty of care. Castles were used to stockpile victuals that could be distributed in times of need. In a letter from 18 August 1570 to Griogair MacGregor, captain of Kilchurn castle, Cailean Liath pledged to reimburse all the damages incurred by the MacGregor raid, and ordered Griogair to give food and shelter to his tenants:

And gif the puir men that wantis geir dwelling onder yow be trow to yow tak thaim in to the place [Kilchurn castle] upoun my [ex]penses and gif to thair wyifis and bairnis sum of my vituall to sustein thaim as ye think expedient. I pray yow have the place weill provydit with sic furnesinge as ye ma get and [spair] nother my geir nor yit your awin for God levinge ws [our] heilthis we will get geir enewche...³²

Kilchurn was amply stocked with supplies in anticipation of harrying, plundering, or even siege by the MacGregors, yet we catch a glimpse of the castle as a centre for social support, or as John MacInnes calls it, ‘a rough and rudimentary welfare system’.³³ Failure to provide protection could lead to a haemorrhaging of dependants towards a clan perceived as more powerful. This is shown earlier in 1552, when Clan MacCallum ‘renunciand MacGregour thair auld’ chief in favour of Cailean Liath Campbell of Glenorchy, obtaining Campbell’s ‘letter of mantenians’ and agreeing to pledge themselves and their successors to his service.³⁴ This coincided with Cailean Liath’s execution of the MacGregor leader Donnchadh Làdasach, which must have shaken the MacCallums’ confidence in the

³¹ *Campbell Letters*, 192; NRS: GD112/39/9/21. In another letter around this time, Cailean Liath criticises Argyll for neglecting his duties as lord, which was a matter ‘wychty and rynis’ to his ‘gret honour’. See *Ibid.*, 179-80; NRS: GD112/39/12/13.

³² *Ibid.*, 190; NRS: GD112/39/9/20.

³³ MacInnes, ‘Clan Unity’, 349.

³⁴ *The Black Book of Taymouth*, ed. Cosmo Innes (Edinburgh, 1855), 194-5.

MacGregors chief's ability to protect them, prompting a transfer of loyalties to a chief who could.³⁵

Protection clearly ranked highly in the hierarchy of a chief's responsibilities. In July 1595, a large force of around 3,000 'redshank' mercenaries took to the sea seemingly bound for Ulster but threatening to ravage lands along the west coast of Scotland. A panicked earl of Argyll, in a show of 'great diligence', rushed home on horseback from Stirling to coordinate defensive positions.³⁶ Argyll was willing to take a backseat in military efforts to stall the mercenaries, especially after his defeat at Glenlivet in 1594, but it is striking how quickly he sprang into action when his own lands and people were endangered.³⁷

Skill and success in war clearly affected a chief's ability to defend his clan's interests, and there is a clear link between martial prowess and protection. An elegy for the Clanranald chiefs, Ailean and Ragnhall, praised their 'defence of [their] tribe' and protection of Scotland's 'hospitality and high plains' while 'dressed in a fine coat of mail'.³⁸ An ideal chief melded protection with expansion:

Síol ailin is ésguigh náigh
eigin an raireir do righ
teid ar faghluibh na iath fein
giall le bfein go hádhbhuigh nír.

The prosperity of the race of Allan has quickly increased,
It is necessary to state that they have been ennobled;
All those he left of them in his own country have been free,
Not having been made hostages by any other forces.³⁹

In this poem, the Clanranald chief Dòmhnall (d. 1617) is praised for his aggressive action, but importantly he did not overextend the resources of the clan and always ensured the protection of his tenants.⁴⁰ Interestingly, Dalgligh has observed that the most acclaimed Glenorchy chiefs in the clan's history, the *Black Book of Taymouth*, were those who

³⁵ MacGregor, 'Political History', 96.

³⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 655-7, 661.

³⁷ He may have been attempting to redeem himself for his defeat in 1594 and restore his discredited military reputation.

³⁸ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 222-3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 228-9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 226-9.

‘acquired and secured new lands, or gained influence in new territories’.⁴¹ Expanding the wealth and territorial extent of the kindred was another key aspiration for a chief. A poor chief failed to protect his kindred and lands, while an average one maintained the *status quo*, retaining the lands he had inherited without making any gains of his own. A truly exceptional chief however would expand the holdings of his clan and pass them down to the next generation.⁴² Protection was an essential requirement that became noteworthy only when it was not provided; prowess in war and clan expansion by contrast were laudable goals, but not as essential.

1.2: Honour in War

The glue that bound together the chief’s protective and martial roles was the pervasive honour culture inhabited by the clan elite. Honour was derived from two intertwined strands: the personal (the chief) and the collective (the clan). Challenging the personal honour of a clan chief was a direct challenge to the honour and integrity of the overall clan that demanded retaliation in kind.⁴³ Honour relations between nobles of comparable status could be volatile. In the preparations before the battle of Glenlivet, the earl of Atholl refused to join with the royal army because he ‘cannot like to be commanded by Argyll’.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he sent his retainer, Iain Dubh, with 400 footsoldiers.⁴⁵ Due to the close ‘interface’ between honour and warfare, martial pursuits remained a pressing concern for the Scottish nobility in the sixteenth century.⁴⁶ Defeat in battle could tarnish the personal honour of a clan chief, as evidenced vividly by the fifth and seventh earls of Argyll. At the battle of Langside on 13 May 1568, the fifth earl led the forces of Mary Queen of Scots, but contrary to his formidable reputation,⁴⁷ he exhibited ‘nather curage nor vassalage [valour] at this conflict’.⁴⁸ At Glenlivet in 1594, the young seventh earl of Argyll was defeated by a numerically smaller army commanded by the earl of Huntly, and allegedly James VI ‘often spoke to him of the battle with derision’.⁴⁹ Although these defeats were clearly humiliating, the status of both earls recovered, and given the overarching

⁴¹ Chris Dalglish, ‘An age of transition? Castles and the Scottish Highland estate in the 16th and 17th centuries’, *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 39/2 (2005), 248.

⁴² Notably, expansion did not always involve military activity. See MacGregor, ‘Political History’, 101-46.

⁴³ *Campbell Letters*, 8-9; Keith Brown, ‘Honour, Honours and Nobility in Scotland between the Reformation and the National Covenant’, *SHR* 91 (April 2012), 42-75; Magdalena Leitner, ‘Conflicts in early modern Scottish letters and law-courts’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015).

⁴⁴ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 450.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Brown, ‘Honour’, 48. One reason that a chief self-identified as a warrior was to ensure that he posed the ‘threat of violence’ to discourage attacks by rivals. See *Ibid.*, 46-54.

⁴⁷ Jane Dawson, *The Politics of Religion in the Age of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Cambridge, 2002), 51-6.

⁴⁸ *The Historie and Life of King James the Sext* (Edinburgh, 1825), 26.

⁴⁹ ‘A Faithful Narrative of Balrinnis’, 150.

responsibility of protection, it may have been more shameful to repeatedly fail to protect or avenge injured tenants.⁵⁰ For the Hebridean clans, their *bìrlinnean* or galleys held special meaning and worth. During the abortive 1595 mercenary campaign to Ireland, the ambush of the MacDonalds of Dunivaig by the English navy at the Copeland Isles cost the Hebrideans ‘many’ men and at least two (possibly as many as five) ships.⁵¹ Their pride in their *bìrlinnean* was so great that their loss was a huge dishonour, perhaps even greater than the men killed:

There is among the islesmen great grudge and regret for the loss of their two ships and many counsels how to redress their dishonour.⁵²

In purely practical terms, this was a severe blow because the *bìrlinnean* were valuable possessions, yet these ships also symbolised the largely maritime way of life in the Hebrides and embodied much of the island clans’ autonomy.⁵³

Tied to ideas of honour, there may have been certain expectations about the ‘right’ way to wage war. The martial rhetoric of Gaelic poetry may have been idealised, but could conceivably be understood as a guide to the proper way for a chief to behave in war and peace. One of the heroic ballads from *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, ‘The Death of Oscar’, focuses on the *ars moriendi* (‘the art of dying’). Essentially, this ballad illustrated how Oscar, having been mortally wounded in battle, ‘died well’ by ‘enduring his wounds and parting with his comrades’.⁵⁴ The majority of heroic ballads composed in Scotland between 1200 and 1600 focused on Fionn mac Cumhaill and the Fian, his roaming bands of warrior-hunters, and their way of life may have been an imagined ideal for the clan elite.⁵⁵

By juxtaposing the praiseworthy deeds of panegyric poetry with the condemnations of satirical poetry, we may unearth a mode of behaviour, an ‘uncodified custom’,⁵⁶ which informed the waging of war in this period.⁵⁷ In poetry, the chief could not simply mastermind the campaign – he had to participate directly, shoulder-to-shoulder with his

⁵⁰ *Campbell Letters*, 12-3.

⁵¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 683, 684-5; *CSPI*, Vol. V, 359, 364, 370.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 688.

⁵³ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 180-4; Colin Martin, ‘A Maritime Dominion – Sea-power and the Lordship’, in Oram, *Lordship of the Isles*, 190-1.

⁵⁴ Meek, ‘Gaelic Ballads’, 65.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁶ Matthew Strickland, *War and Chivalry* (Cambridge, 1996), 53.

⁵⁷ It is nevertheless important to note that these poetic ideals did not always match reality, as discussed in Chapter 4.

men. Some poetry suggests that the clan's success in war was shameful if the chief himself was not involved:

Is mithigh sgur réd mharbhnaidh,
a shean bheathaigh bhiothcharnaigh,
mheic Ruaidhrí ón mhúr a mach,
fhuair ní gan lúth gan lámhach.

It is time to cease thine elegy,
thou aged animal ever fleshly,
thou son of Roderick, from the sea-girt fortress,
who didst win gear without show of vigour or spearcast.⁵⁸

This satire by Fionnlagh Ruadh on the Clanranald chief Ailean MacRuaidhrí presents him as the antithesis of the athletic ideal, and his 'fortress' of Castle Tioram is invoked to emphasise his sedentary nature (akin perhaps to a *roi fainéant*, a 'do-nothing king'). Another poem by Fionnlagh Ruadh, addressed to Eoin MacGregor (d. 1519), outlines the only honourable and lawful way of initiating acts of war:

'N uair chinned ar chomhrag,
'gá ghairm i gcrích námhad,
is ris féin do thaobhaid
i riocht géill is brághad.

When men decide for combat,
proclaiming it in foemen's bounds,
it is to his side they come
in form of hostage and captive.⁵⁹

The attacking MacGregors enter the land of their enemy and signal their intention to raid, providing an opportunity for the enemy to give up hostages and prevent any bloodshed. Dishonourable behaviour would presumably have been an unannounced, merciless raid that offered no room for parley. Many cultures in medieval Europe marked the 'transition

⁵⁸ *Scottish Verse*, 134-5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 146-7.

to and from war' through similar ritualistic patterns of behaviour, perhaps because warfare breached the 'fundamental human taboo' of killing another human being.⁶⁰ Signalling intention to raid remained a motif of poetry into the seventeenth century, as shown in this composition made c. 1635 by the MacLean poet Eachann Bacach to his chief Sir Lachlann (d. 1649):

Nuair a spreagadh sibh pìob
's fuaim bhur creach ga cur sìos
gum biodh crith air an tìr an tachradh sibh.

Nuiar a nochdadh sibh sròil
ris na caol-chrannaibh stòir,
's maìrg a thachradh d'a dheòin roimh'n lasan sin.

When you would start up the pipe,
with the sound of your forays drowning it out,
the land where you happened to be would tremble.

When you would unfurl satin banners
on the slender pointed staffs,
woe to him who stood deliberately in the path of that rage.⁶¹

Other seemingly reprehensible acts included the raiding of church buildings and attacks on the clergy, as shown in the already discussed satire of Ailean MacRuaidhrí. Fionnlagh Ruadh denounced Ailean for a litany of heinous crimes, the most egregious of which was the desecration of Iona monastery:

Do rinn tusa, 's ní h-í a mháin,
creach Íe is reilge Odhráin;
is tú dhochann go borb ann
cochall na n-ord 's na n-aifreann.

⁶⁰ Robert W. Jones, *Bloodied Banners: Martial Display on the Medieval Battlefield* (Woodbridge, 2010), 110-11.

⁶¹ *Eachan Bacach*, 2-3, 153-4, 167.

You carried out, and that was not all,
the despoiling of Iona and Odhrán's graveyard;
it was you who barbarously mutilated there
the shrine of the gospels and masses.⁶²

Not only did Ailean plunder the monastery of Iona, but he purposefully damaged its sacred relic in an attempt to subvert religious worship. His staunch commitment to blasphemy and law-breaking is portrayed as self-destructive, with divine intervention bringing madness to Ailean and poverty to his clan.⁶³ The inverse of this satire, the praising of a chief who 'made no war on church', was a common motif intended to highlight piety.⁶⁴ Perhaps the underlying implication of this trope is that such violence was not uncommon, and a chief who refused to raid churches was exceptional in his restraint. In the sixteenth century, there is at least one genuine example of warfare involving a church or church-ground (the battle of Carinish in 1601).⁶⁵ Violence involving churches was a particularly common trope in clan tradition,⁶⁶ perhaps suggesting that these incidents were not all fictitious.

An uncommonly ruthless and bloodthirsty attitude to war is found in another poem from *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* addressed to Gilleasbuig Campbell, the second earl of Argyll (d. 1513). This famous poem, a subject of considerable historiographical debate,⁶⁷ presents a merciless and brutal vision of warfare, probably in reference to a prospective campaign against the *Goill* ('foreigners' but probably meaning English in this instance) that eventually culminated in the battle of Flodden in 1513. According to this poem, this was to be no 'gentle warfare' but a war of genocide.⁶⁸ Argyll is encouraged to lead the complete eradication of the *Goill*, including women and children:

⁶² *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 254-5; *Scottish Verse*, 136-7.

⁶³ In marked contrast to the wicked figure in this satire, an elegy for Ailean by one of the MacMhuirichs praises him in the manner of typical panegyric. The polar extremes of bardic poetry are represented by this paired satire and elegy, and there may be truths and falsehoods in both portrayals of Ailean. See *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 217-225; *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 198-209.

⁶⁴ *Scottish Verse*, 90-1, 200-1; *HP*, Vol. I, 51.

⁶⁵ *Infra*: 186-87.

⁶⁶ MacCoinnich, 'Conflict and Identity', 157.

⁶⁷ MacGregor and Coira both supported the traditional interpretation of the poem as relating to Flodden, while Ó Briain and Boardman suggested it was composed in the context of the Dòmhnall Dubh rising of 1502-3. Boardman has since conceded that the former interpretation is probably correct. See M. Pía Coira, 'The Earl of Argyll and the *Goill*: The 'Flodden Poem' Revisited', *SGS*, 24 (2008), 150-8; Màrtainn MacGriogair, 'An dàn 'Flodden' ann an Leabhar Deadhan Lios-mòir', in *Cànan & Cultar: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 4*, eds Gillian Munro & Richard A. V. Cox (Dunedin, 2010), 34; Màirtín Ó Briain, 'Snaithín san uige: "Loisc agus léig a luaith le sruth"', in *Téada Dúchais: Aistí in Ómós don Ollamh Breandán Ó Madagáin*, eds Máirtín Ó Briain & Pádraig Ó Héalaí (Inverin, 2002), 245-73; Boardman, *Campbells*, 281; Steve Boardman, 'Highland Scots and Anglo-Scottish Warfare, c. 1300-1513', in King & Simpkin, *England and Scotland at War*, 252 n. 67.

⁶⁸ *Scottish Verse*, 159.

Na fréamha ó bhfuilid ag fás,
díthigh iad, mór a bhforfhás,
nach faighthear Gall beó dot éis,
ná Gaillseach ann ré *h-aisnéis*.

Loisg a mbantracht nach maith mín,
loisg a gclannmhaicne ainmhín,
is loisg a dtighe dubha,
is coisg dhínn a n-anghutha.

Léig le h-uisge a luaithre sin,
i ndiaidh loisgthe dá dtaisibh;
ná déan teóchroidhe a béo Gall,
a eó bheóghoine anbhfann.

The roots from which they grow,
destroy them; over-great is their increase;
so that after thee no Saxon be left in life,
nor Saxon woman to be mentioned.

Burn their womenfolk ungentle,
burn their ungentle children;
and burn their black houses,
and rid us of the reproach of them.

Send their ashes down the stream,
after burning of their bodies;
show no pity for living Saxon,
thou vigorous salmon dealing mortal wounds.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 161-3. Giolla Críost Táilliúr's poem to Iain Stewart, found in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, features imagery redolent of the 'Flodden Poem'. Stewart is praised for destroying wolves that had been ravaging the land and devouring cattle: 'luaith i gConghail dá gcorp cnámhach/ let there be ashes in Connel from their bony bodies'. The purgative action of burning the wolves' bodies, with their ashes thrown in a stream, emphasises that the *Goill* are being depicted as vermin in the 'Flodden Poem'. See *Ibid.*, 176-9.

The above stanzas are characteristic of common tropes associated with ‘othering’: the continued existence of the enemy is an insult that justified bloodshed (‘rid us of the reproach of them’) and the ultimate violence involved the ‘purifying’ act of the ‘burning of their bodies’.⁷⁰ The severe treatment of the *Goill* advocated here is largely at odds with most other contemporary examples that deal with warfare, for which defeat of the enemy in battle is generally the end-point. However, the ‘Flodden Poem’, apparently composed on the eve of battle with the English, tapped into a widespread nationalistic spirit, and could be described as a *brosnachadh catha*, an incitement to battle.⁷¹ Another poem which bears considerable resemblance to the ‘Flodden poem’ in both tone and imagery was also related to the same battle. Giolla Pádraig MacLachlan’s poem to Seumas Campbell of Lawers was framed by Flodden, but from the bleaker perspective of its aftermath:

Mac Eoin mhir na slógh ’s na gconnlann,
gach ród díobhsan lomlán;
níor léig Eoin do shíoradh Dubhghall,
fear díola duan dtromdhámh.

The son of fierce John of hosts and companies,
each road is filled with them;
John ceased not from chasing Saxons,
a man who requited the songs of weighty bardic trains.⁷²

The enormous human cost of Flodden, including King James IV himself, levelled the Scottish political establishment. Seumas’ father, Iain, was among those killed at the battle, as was the second earl of Argyll.⁷³ Although the poem elides any explicit mention of the heavy defeat,⁷⁴ it has a bitter, even retributive tone that urges Seumas to attack the *Goill* as a matter of honour. The contingent circumstances of these two poems – one of which is an incitement to war and the other a call for vengeance – probably explains the extreme nature of their vision of warfare, which is generally not reflective of other poetic evidence or indeed the actual conduct of Highland soldiers in war, as shown in Chapter 4.

⁷⁰ Mark Levene, ‘Introduction’, in *The Massacre in History*, eds Mark Levene & Penny Roberts (Berghahn Books, 2009), 17.

⁷¹ *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 228-231, 238-245.

⁷² *Scottish Verse*, 114-5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁷⁴ Coira, ‘The ‘Flodden Poem’ Revisited’, 157-8.

1.3: Ritualism and Youth

A famous passage from Martin Martin's *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1703) suggests that a strong sense of ritual and ceremony pervaded the martial culture of the West Highlands and Isles:

Every Heir, or young Chieftain of a Tribe, was oblig'd in Honour to give a publick Specimen of his Valour, before he was own'd an'd declar'd Governor or Leader of his people, who obey'd and follow'd him upon all Occasions.

This Chieftain was usually attended with a retinue of young Men of Quality, who had not beforehand given any Proof of their Valour, and were ambitious of such an Opportunity to signalize themselves.

It was usual for the Captain to lead them, to make a desperate Incursion upon some Neighbour or other that they were in Feud with; and they were oblig'd to bring by open force the Cattel they found in the Lands they attack'd, or to die in the Attempt.

After the Performance of this Achievement, the young Chieftain was ever after reputed valiant and worthy of Government, and such as were of his Retinue acquir'd the like Reputation. This Custom being reciprocally us'd among them, was not reputed Robbery, for the Damage which one Tribe sustain'd by this Essay of the Chieftain of another, was repair'd when their Chieftain came in his turn to make his Specimen...⁷⁵

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is evidence to suggest that ritualised, inaugural raids were indeed part of the fabric of clan society, and functioned as a 'graduation ceremony' from the clan's military 'school'.⁷⁶ Martin concedes that this 'Practice' had not been recorded 'for these sixty Years past', and thus by his reckoning, the last ritual cattle raid took place c.1640,⁷⁷ which may correlate with events such as the 1645 raid of Moyness by young warriors of the Clan Cameron.⁷⁸ Brown has observed an analogous proclivity towards ceremonial violence among the aristocratic youth of both the Highlands and the Lowlands.

⁷⁵ Martin, *Description*, 101-2.

⁷⁶ MacInnes, *Clanship*, 33. This practice was also seen in Gaelic Ireland. See David Edwards, 'The escalation of violence in sixteenth-century Ireland', in *Age of Atrocity: Violence and political conflict in early modern Ireland*, eds David Edwards, Pàdraig Lenihan & Clodagh Tait (Dublin, 2007), 41.

⁷⁷ Martin, *Description*, 102.

⁷⁸ John Stewart of Ardvorlich, *The Camerons: A History of Clan Cameron* (1974), 49-50. MacInnes has suggested that the last ritualised raid was conducted by the MacDonalds of Keppoch in 1670. See Allan I. MacInnes, 'Lochaber – The Last Bandit Country, c. 1600-c.1750', *TGSI*, 64 (2008), 3.

Young noblemen in the Lowlands were encouraged by their fathers to ‘earn their stripes’ and enhance their family’s honour, and often ‘acted on impulse...with a bravado [that] was extremely dangerous in this kind of society’.⁷⁹ He argues that these individuals were often at the ‘epicentre’ of violence during the sixteenth century.⁸⁰ This ritualised violence may be linked even more broadly to the arguably universal concept of the rite of passage.

Forays provided the heir or newly inaugurated chief with a platform from which he could demonstrate his martial prowess and consequent worthiness to rule. Simms has claimed that in Gaelic Ireland the chief was expected to be at the forefront of the raid and exhibit ‘reckless bravery’ or even ‘suicidal eagerness’,⁸¹ which resonates with Martin’s description of inaugural raids in the Highlands. Victims of a raid may have endured the ransacking of their lands more easily in the knowledge that their own chief would soon respond with a counter-attack, an idea perhaps given voice in an elegy to Dòmhnall (d. 1617) the Clanranald chief:

...an ttiobhradh sin dfoghladh e
do fholuigh se treibh dha thi

All that had been plundered from him
He afterwards recovered the flocks.⁸²

Raids were not so ritualised or innocuous that the aggrieved relented entirely willingly, as even Martin notes that there was a chance the attackers would ‘die in the Attempt’.⁸³ According to Martin, if the raid was successful, the chief and his ‘retinue of young Men of Quality’ no longer had anything to prove, at least in terms of martial ability.⁸⁴ The clear encouragement of young men to prove their martial worth suggests that the succession of a new chief was intended to usher in a fresh generation of warriors for the clan, many of whom may have joined the traditional chiefly retinue of twelve close kinsmen.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 21-22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸¹ Simms, ‘Images of Warfare’, 608-9.

⁸² *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 226-7.

⁸³ Martin, *Description*, 101-2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *A Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland, from its origin to the year 1630: written by Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun* (Edinburgh, 1813), 244; MacGregor, ‘The Lament’, 142, 148 n. 61; Macinnes, *Clanship*, 57, 67; MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 219.

Hot-headed behaviour by young clansmen was considered extremely conventional by contemporaries. In March 1591, John Auchinross, the secretary of Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart, claimed that the ‘young and loose men in the west isles, Kintyre, Argyle and other places will be readily allured’ by the promise of money to aid the rebellion of Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill in Ireland.⁸⁶ In a letter to the English diplomat Robert Bowes from 4 July 1595, MacLean himself described the MacLeods of Lewis and the MacLeods of Harris as ‘young men of high spirit, desirous to “acqwent thame” in wars and receiving great gains’.⁸⁷ This reinforces the idea that young men felt an urge to experience war, not just to gain riches but to prove themselves as warriors. Importantly, MacLean is defending, not criticising, the MacLeods’ motivations, and actually recommends them for future service with the English crown. This suggests that these youthful aspirations were considered entirely acceptable in elite society in the Highlands and also that MacLean expected this to be readily understood by the English.

1.4: Military Leadership

On occasion clan chiefs would delegate military affairs to their sons. In 1555, the earl of Argyll sent his son, Gilleasbuig, on campaign in Ireland,⁸⁸ and in 1595, Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig sent his son to overwinter with the Irish chiefs.⁸⁹ This may have become more common as chiefs aged, allowing them to retreat from intensive military activity whilst simultaneously providing potential successors with vital experience. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that delegation did not stop at military affairs and that chiefs could bequeath the overall management of clan affairs to his heir.⁹⁰ As MacGregor has suggested, surrogate military leaders were occasionally used in the Highlands and Isles, although arguably the most famous example, Dòmhnall Ballach (d. 1476), was active earlier than our period.⁹¹ Apart from the aforementioned elevation of a chief’s son (which is arguably a different phenomenon), there are relatively few examples of the surrogate in our period,⁹² and MacGregor’s three examples of surrogacy in war from 1601, 1603, and 1614-15 are somewhat problematic.⁹³ In 1601, Alasdair, the brother of Ruairidh Mòr

⁸⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. X, 489.

⁸⁷ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 629.

⁸⁸ Alastair Campbell of Airds, *A History of Clan Campbell*, Vol. II (Edinburgh, 2002), 42; *Annals of the Four Masters [AFM]* 5, ed. Karen O’Brien (University College, Cork), M1555.5.

⁸⁹ *CSPI*, Vol. V, 359; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 684.

⁹⁰ *Infra*: 149-50; *AT*, IV, 164.

⁹¹ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 218.

⁹² At the battle of Glenlivet in 1594, the brother of Ruairidh MacNeill of Barra appears to have led his clan’s forces in support of the earl of Argyll. See *The History of the Feuds and Conflicts Among the Clans* (Glasgow, 1780), 51; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 459; *Historie of King James*, 340; Campbell of Airds, *Clan Campbell*, Vol. II, 113-4. For discussion of MacNeill’s death at the battle, see *Infra*: 117, 123.

⁹³ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 218.

MacLeod of Harris, led his clan's forces against an invasion by Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat, yet this was out of pure necessity as Ruairidh was absent in Argyll.⁹⁴ This was a crisis in which someone had to take responsibility, a rather different scenario to a nominated surrogate in military affairs. In 1603, MacGregor of Glenstrae's brother Iain Dubh does appear to have played a pivotal role in the battle of Glen Fruin, but his brother and chief Alasdair was also active in the battle.⁹⁵ In these examples from 1601 and 1603, the brother of the chief seems to have acted as a trusted lieutenant and second-in-command, rather than a military surrogate. A late example of the surrogate may be Colla Ciotach, who was certainly the 'driving force' behind the early stages of the 'Islay Rising' under Aonghas Òg in 1614.⁹⁶ Yet his later actions suggest that he was an independent operator not a loyal 'right-hand man', as shown when he betrayed Sir Seumas in the final moments of the rising.⁹⁷ As Sir Seumas was a capable military leader in his own right, his relationship with Colla more closely resembles a loose alliance of near equals rather than a chief/surrogate scenario.

More striking than military surrogacy is how often chiefs would personally lead military campaigns in this period, most vividly evidenced by the fact that several chiefs died in battle: Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat (d. c. 1540);⁹⁸ Hugh or Ùisdean Fraser of Lovat (d. 1544); and Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart (d. 1598).⁹⁹ The mercenary campaigns to Ireland in 1594 and 1595 also illustrate the extent of chiefs' involvement. In these years, MacDonald of Dunivaig, MacDonald of Sleat, the captain of Clanranald, and MacLeod of Harris all led their clan contingents across the North Channel, although the Clanranald captain was ambushed by MacLean of Duart before he left Scotland. This may stem from societal expectations of the chief's military role: some were young men with something to prove (MacLeod of Harris and the captain of Clanranald), while others were experienced veterans in their prime (MacDonald of Sleat and MacDonald of Dunivaig). Additionally, the chiefs may have wanted personal control of the payment for their service or to use the campaign to cultivate diplomatic links with the Irish chiefs. Beyond a strict military role, they may have even felt obliged to oversee these campaigns as protector and provider of the clan. Various motivating factors caused chiefs to campaign in Ireland, yet

⁹⁴ *Infra*: 187-9.

⁹⁵ *Infra*: 167-72.

⁹⁶ Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 41.

⁹⁷ *Infra*: 224.

⁹⁸ *HP*, Vol. I, 72 n.1, 102, 215; Gregory, *History*, 145-6.

⁹⁹ At the same battle in 1598 that resulted in Lachlann's death, his opponent Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig was badly wounded by an 'arrow through the body'. He was reportedly 'left the most part of the ensuing night for dead amongst the slain bodies'. See *History of the feuds*, 66.

the very fact of their personal involvement indicates that these military operations were regarded as a matter of primacy in clan affairs.

1.5: Martial Recreation and Hunting

Thus far it may appear that young men dominated the martial culture of the Highlands and Isles, but militarism was not the sole reserve of the youth. A lively martial culture was broadly engendered by chiefs to maintain fitness, martial proficiency, and *esprit de corps* in times of war and peace. In his letter to Henry VIII, John Elder claimed that the Highland Scots ‘delite and pleasure...in rynnige, leapinge, swymmynge, shootyng, and thrawinge of dartis’.¹⁰⁰ The Clan Fraser history claims that the chief Ùisdean (d. 1544) was a ‘great hunter and a man of the field, lovd sport, and tooke pleasur to train his men exactly at sword and bow, the onely arms then in use’.¹⁰¹ Ùisdean’s grandson and namesake maintained this dedication to training, but pioneered an element of communal competition. During his youth, Ùisdean visited his mother, Jean Campbell, and her new husband, Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat, in Skye:

...there he learned to be a bowman, and in a short time few or none could compeat or cop with him in arching, either at butts, bowmarks, or roaving, and perhaps afterwards had the better of some who gloried much and were masters in that manly art, which now is wearing away by degrees, and the gun takeing place.¹⁰²

So impressive was Ùisdean’s skill and dedication to the practice of archery that by his ‘example all the country turnd expert in arching...and he oblided every parish to have their bowmarks, and set dayes of game, and himself went in circuit to see it put in practice’.¹⁰³ These public competitions had several purposes, not least the provision of entertainment for the wider kindred.¹⁰⁴ No matter how recreational Hugh’s motivations may have been, these competitions amounted to training in a deadly weapon, and were

¹⁰⁰ *The Bannatyne Miscellany* (Edinburgh, 1827), 13.

¹⁰¹ *Chronicles of the Frasers: The Wardlaw Manuscript*, ed. William Mackay (Edinburgh, 1905), 129.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 146-50. The detail that Ùisdean learned archery in Skye, under the tutelage of the MacDonalds of Sleat, is interesting, and may suggest an affinity for the pursuit in the Western Isles.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 150. This encouragement of archery practice is reminiscent of King James I’s approach from the previous century. See *RPS*, James I, 1424/20.

¹⁰⁴ Gaelic poetry composed some 35 years later than our immediate period may corroborate the idea that these competitions were, in part, for entertainment. Iain Lom’s lament for the Marquis of Huntly (d. 1649) describes an archery competition (reminiscent of the Frasers’ contest) in which bets were wagered. These competitions were emblematic of Huntly’s vibrant lordship. See *Orain Iain Luim: Songs of John MacDonald, Bard of Keppoch*, ed. Anne M. Mackenzie (Edinburgh, 1964), 50-51, 254-6.

useful tests or demonstrations of individual martial skill to further elevate the persona of the elite warrior.¹⁰⁵

Martial recreation and competition extended to hunting, a ubiquitous practice among the elite that was often couched in military language. As Andrew Wiseman has recently demonstrated, there was an indissoluble connection between hunting and warfare within Gaelic society, a link substantiated by copious evidence from contemporary poetry and West Highland sculpture.¹⁰⁶ The two activities clearly complemented and informed each other, with hunting acting as a prelude to (or interlude between) open conflict with human foes – a ‘further, and greater, happening’.¹⁰⁷ Hunting was considered a ‘noble sport’ across Scotland and Europe,¹⁰⁸ and in *Basilikon Doron*, James VI offered sparing praise for hawking because it did not ‘resembleth the warres so neere as hunting doeth, in making a man hardie, and skilfully ridden in all grounds’.¹⁰⁹ Alasdair Crotach MacLeod of Harris’ tomb in St Clement’s Church in Rodel depicts a hunting scene in which the chief is fully equipped for war.¹¹⁰ In a letter written in August 1595 to the English diplomat Robert Bowes, Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart expressed his eagerness to be deployed against Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill in Ireland on behalf of Queen Elizabeth by likening his prospective military campaign to the hunt:

I am here in Argyle at pastime and hunting with the Earl [of Argyll]. I have respect to other kind of hunting than this present hunting of deer.¹¹¹

This interplay was noted as early as 1527, when Hector Boece argued that the Highlanders’ penchant for hunting was part of a strict regimen which maintained physical fitness in the interval between military campaigns.¹¹² The relationship between hunting and warfare is perhaps best understood as essentially representing the same pursuit but in different arenas of conflict: hunting was conflict against animals, war was conflict against man.

¹⁰⁵ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 218.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Wiseman, ‘Chasing the Deer: Hunting Iconography, Literature and Tradition of the Scottish Highlands’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2007), 30.

¹⁰⁷ Meek, ‘The corpus of heroic verse’, 97.

¹⁰⁸ John M. Gilbert, *Hunting and Hunting Reserves in Medieval Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), 72.

¹⁰⁹ *King James VI and I: selected writings*, 253. See *Monro’s Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. R.W. Munro (Edinburgh, 1961), 57, 66, 68, 70, 81; *The Bannatyne Miscellany* (Edinburgh, 1827), 13; MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 149.

¹¹⁰ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, pl. 32B.

¹¹¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 685.

¹¹² *History of Scotland by Hector Boece*, Vol. I, lvi.

A poem from *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* composed for Maol Coluim, chief of Clan Gregor from 1415-1440, further underscores this connection:

Cungbhálach na coimhshealga
Mac Griogóir as garg daoine;
níor mhionca coin chroidhearga
go longphort Clainne Baoisgne.

Líon troda do thóiseachaibh
éirghidh leis i ló catha;
fíor íota ar óirshleaghaibh
'gá lucht tighe san dtachar.

Ceannas feadhna is féitheamhnas,
coitchoinn is clú dá chineadh,
ar beirn ghaisgidh ghléidhearbhas
Mac Griogóir grádh na bhfileadh.

Maintainer of the joint hunt is
MacGregor whose men are fierce;
not oftener did hounds red with gore
enter the encampment of Clann Baoisgne.

A full battle-complement of captains
goeth out with him in day of strife;
right thirsty are the golden spears
of his household in the encounter.

Captaincy and protection
(it bringeth glory to all his tribe alike)
MacGregor, loved of poets,
clearly shows in valour's gap.¹¹³

¹¹³ *Scottish Verse*, 28-31.

In this poem, hunting is so closely aligned with warfare that the two activities are nearly indistinguishable. The poet's aristocratic audience would immediately recognise the martial connotations and practical military application signified by hunting. A possible consequence of this close association was the conflation of expectations of a chief in hunting and war. This may be evidenced in the final stanza quoted above, which highlighted the concept of 'valour's gap'.¹¹⁴ In hunting, this was a moment of high drama and danger, in which a chief tested his courage by attempting to kill a deer 'head-on in a very public display of...machismo'.¹¹⁵ This potentially deadly encounter suggests that chiefs were prepared to risk life and limb in order to prove their martial prowess. Wiseman assessed the above stanza solely in regard to hunting, yet as mentioned, the surrounding detail may suggest 'valour's gap' applied to a military context – Maol Coluim departed in 'day of strife', or perhaps, 'day of battle'.¹¹⁶ From the militaristic imagery of the hunt in this poem, it may be inferred that a chief was expected to perform similar acts of daring and bravado in warfare, akin to 'valour's gap'.

The hunt was much more than a simple surrogate for warfare however. As an exclusive right of the aristocracy, the ability to hunt freely within a given area signified lordship and control. Early Irish law stipulated that a chief would lose his honour-price if he hunted without a retinue,¹¹⁷ and from a broader perspective, Beaver has argued that the 'carefully orchestrated violence' of the hunt was a practical reinforcement of the established social order and hierarchy.¹¹⁸ Moreover, there was a clear economic function to the hunt, in which a successful hunt allowed the chief to act as a provider and protector of his clan by laying on a feast.¹¹⁹ Although the military connotations of the hunt are obvious, there were other practical reasons to engage in this activity.

1.6: The Role of the Castle

The central hub of a clan's territory was the chief's castle or stronghold. In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the 'military overstatement' in studies of the castle. These structures had various purposes beyond their martial role and were understood by

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-31.

¹¹⁵ Wiseman, *Chasing the Deer*, 32.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* Watson translates 'catha' as 'strife', but 'cath' fundamentally means 'battle'. This may simply underline the intrinsic military nature of the hunt, but could indicate a battle with human foes. See Edward Dwelly, *Faclair Gàidhlig* (Edinburgh, 2001), 173.

¹¹⁷ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), 19. In 1703, Martin Martin noted that the 'chieftain [was] usually attended with a numerous Retinue when he goes a hunting the Deer, this being his first Specimen of manly Exercise'. See Martin, *Description*, 107.

¹¹⁸ Daniel C. Beaver, *Hunting and the Politics of Violence before the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 2008), 17.

¹¹⁹ Dodgshon, *Chiefs to Landlords*, 84-7.

contemporaries as symbolising lordship and territorial control, while functioning as daily residences for local lords.¹²⁰ Significantly, in Scottish Gaelic poetry, the castle is predominantly featured as a venue for lavish feasts, rather than as a military base or the site of a destructive siege. Although this could stem from the poet's position as household entertainer rather than warrior, Simms has argued that chiefs could modify the message of a poem depending on how they wished to be represented.¹²¹ This suggests that they preferred to be depicted as generous hosts rather than fearsome besiegers of strongholds. A poem addressed to Eoin MacGregor (d. 1519) presents a gregarious image of a chief's household:

Fhuras mo rogha theach mhór,
i mbí na cliara ag comhól...

Neirtghníomhradh a chon 's a shluagh
is meinic le Eoin armruadh :
a h-aithle na sealg ón teach
gach faithche dearg ón fhiadhach.

Mar soin dh'fhág na saoir ar chóir
bruidhean chúplach Mheic Ghriogóir,
gan locht sairse ré ar linn
ar dtocht dhaoibhse ar a h-árainn.

Fíon 'gá ibhe ag mnáibh malla,
Mheic Ghriogóir, id mhóorthalla :
id bhruigh tréan fairsing, ar linn,
céir ar lasadh go h-ursainn...

Fairsing dá thaobh do thaighe,
líonmhor a lucht comhnaidhe :

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Stell, *Castle Tioram: A Statement of Cultural Significance* (Historic Scotland, 2006), 11-12; Geoffrey Stell, 'Castle Tioram and the MacDonalds of Clanranald: A Western Seaboard Castle in Context', in Oram, *Lordship of the Isles*, 271-96; Charles McKean, 'A Scottish problem with castles', *Historical Research*, 79 (May 2006), 166-98; Matthew Johnson, *Behind the Castle Gate: From Medieval to Renaissance* (London, 2002), 3, 33.

¹²¹ Simms, 'Bardic Poetry', 60. Chiefs themselves composed poetry, as shown by Donnchadh Campbell of Glenorchy's compositions in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*. See W. Gillies, 'The Gaelic Poems of Sir Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy I, II, III', *SGS*, 13 (1979-81), 18-45, 263-88; 14 (1983), 59-82.

ríoghól na gcéad ar a lár,
mór do théad is do sheandán.

I have found of houses my choice supreme, a house
wherein the poet-bands are wont to feast...

Mighty deeds by his hounds and his hosts
are frequent with red-weaponed John;¹²²
when hunting is made from the house,
the hunt leaves every greensward red.

Thus did the masons leave aright
the coupled house of MacGregor,
nor is there any lack of masonry in our time,
since thou has come to its demesne.

Wine is drunk by stately dames,
MacGregor, in thy spacious hall;
in thy wide firm mansion, as I deem,
wax is ablaze even to the door-post...

Wide are thy house's two sides;
many are they who dwell therein;
a royal banquet for hundreds is on its floor;
many a harp, many an ancient song, is heard within it.¹²³

MacGregor's castle undoubtedly functioned as a muster point for his military forces, but his household is the site of all kinds of activity: hunting parties depart from the castle gates, poet-bands and other visitors are constantly passing through, and Eoin hosts bounteous feasts with hundreds of guests. Thus this poem presents an image of merriment rather than militarism. A repetitive but insightful poem by Feilimidh MacDougall outlines all that the

¹²² Again we note the near amalgamation of hunting with warfare.

¹²³ *Scottish Verse*, 148-157.

poet finds ‘not good’, and by reversing these proclamations we can ascertain what is ‘good’.¹²⁴ Again the hosting-and-hunting aspect of a castle is paramount:

...ní math caisléan gan mheadhar,
ní math dearmad chon toighe...

...ní math aolchloch gan talla.

...not good a castle without merriment,
not good to neglect the household dogs...

Not good is a lime-built castle lacking a hall.¹²⁵

One contemporary poem suggests that the chief’s castle was quite literally a living entity. Lamenting the death of Eoin MacDougall of Dunollie, the poem states:

D’éis uí Cholla na gcuach n-óir
mar thá na tír, truagh na tíormór;
traothadh ar tuireadh ní fhuil,
saothadh a ndún ’s a ndúthaigh.

Alas! How the death of Colla’s descendant of golden goblets
has left the land; sad is the mainland;
abatment of lament there is none;
it is the withering of their castles and their countries.¹²⁶

Without the lifeblood provided by the chief’s vibrant feasts, the castle and land slowly weaken and die. The fate of the castle was bound inextricably to the chief and vice versa, and as argued by Dodgshon, if the ‘chief lived well then so did the clan’.¹²⁷ The liveliness of the chief’s castle could therefore measure clan prosperity at a glance. Poems that detail lavish feasts may implicitly celebrate the martial prowess of the host, as only chiefs who

¹²⁴ This poem takes a very broad view of contemporary society covering gender issues, religion, alcohol consumption, and agriculture. It does mention warfare at one point: ‘ní math cogadh gan chalmacht/not good is war without courage’. See *Ibid.*, 240-1.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 240-3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 172-3

¹²⁷ Dodgshon, *Chiefs to Landlords*, 85.

protected their food reserves could afford to lay on such opulent festivities.¹²⁸ Some poetry directly correlated successful cattle raids or victories in battle with subsequent celebratory banquets hosted by the chief at his stronghold using the spoils of war.¹²⁹ Feasts could therefore symbolise success in war, and on a more prosaic level, the celebratory feast also fostered and maintained morale among the warrior elite of the clan.

Some poetry directly links the castle to warfare, yet such allusions are rare and often abstract, again emphasising that there are limits to the military ethos of society.¹³⁰ The castle as a mustering point is a motif used in the elegy for Donnchadh Campbell (d. 1631):

Iarla Abhuill is Iarla Drumonn
diúcfhuil Mhoráigh, mór an dáimh;
sgach glún da n-gargshlógh 'na n-deaghaidh
gu múr ardmhór Bhealaich bháin.

The Earl of Atholl and the Earl of Drummond,
the ducal blood of Moray, great the train;
and each knee of their fierce hosts behind them
to the great high rampart of white Bealach.¹³¹

The poem goes on to relate a feast of 'mílídh meardha/brisk warriors' at Balloch, suggesting that these festivities were a prelude or epilogue to military activity. An elegy to the Clanranald chief Dòmhnall (d. 1617) conjures an abstract image of military activity at a castle:

Smúal ro bhras dod ghormloinn ghéir
a Dhomhnaill fa dhoras dúin
ceilter ré os cholbha cúain
do chuaidh dé na foghla fúibh.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85-7.

¹²⁹ *Scottish Verse*, 112-3, 146-7.

¹³⁰ In practical terms, warfare did occasionally involve attacking castles, as will be shown in Chapter 4.

¹³¹ *Marbhnadh Dhonnchaidh Duibh*, ed. and trans. William J. Watson (Glasgow, 1917), 10-1.

A spark flew from thy sharp blue sword,
O Donald, at the fort's gate;
The moon is hidden above the banks of the coasts,
The smoke of the plunder rose to it.¹³²

Overall however, it is clear that castles were not viewed purely as military structures in the West Highlands and Isles, which resonates with new research about their function elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless, it appears likely that they did function as both a military base and a venue for social bonding for the chief and the warrior elite.

1.7: Conclusion

Among the elite, the militarisation of Gaelic society was profound but not all-encompassing. The elite of society inhabited a martial culture that regarded warfare and militarism as a natural, even necessary aspect of lordship, a view that permeated through poetry, sculpture, and personal action. Indeed, the prevailing image of the contemporary male, as shown by both sculpture and poetry, was that of a warrior, yet this was mirrored by noble culture elsewhere in medieval and early modern Europe. Moreover, this image of the warrior could also symbolise lordship and the protective aura of the chief. The continuing influence of heroic literature, like the Ulster Cycle, potentially maintained warlike aspirations and affinities in the Highlands, which, when coupled with deeply held views of honour and dishonour, could provoke conflict. Nevertheless, honour culture placed theoretical restrictions on bloodshed by inculcating a sense of the 'right' way to wage war. The worldview of the elite must have been shared, at least partly, with those lower down the social scale, especially through martial displays such as hunting, and the broad participation in warfare across most social classes, as will be shown in Chapter 3. Clan leaders and their retinues clearly felt the burden of societal expectations about the martial prowess of the elite, and as a consequence, they often became directly involved in military campaigns.

Although a chief was undoubtedly expected to be a capable military leader, the paramount concern of clan society was his ability to protect his clan and lands. After all, what good was a warrior-chief who failed to protect his clan? All other responsibilities flowed outwards from the central principle of protection, and in this way, chiefs were distinguished from petty warlords whilst still inhabiting a mental world largely defined by war.

¹³² *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 228-9.

Chapter 2: Causation of Warfare

A frequent refrain of Lowland literati from the sixteenth century was that the people of the Highlands were innately bellicose:

...men of the Highland...are not less, but rather much more, prompt to fight...because, born as they are in the mountains and dwellers in forests, their very nature is more combative....war rather than peace is their natural condition.¹

Some modern writers have broadly accepted the view that warfare and feuding in the Highlands was 'more intense' than the rest of Scotland because the 'land was hilly and the king remote'.² Relatively little work has been conducted into the causation of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles, which has perhaps allowed stereotypes of the 'warlike' Highlanders to proliferate for longer than they should. This chapter will demonstrate that warfare was generally waged in the region for specific reasons and towards specific goals. Although the martial culture of the Highlands may have inculcated a certain propensity for violence, war was not the natural state of Highlanders and Islanders. As MacGregor has observed, a recurrent and perhaps 'predominant' cause of armed conflict was 'right – to land, chiefship, and lordship'.³ When these core rights were perceived to have been violated or challenged, warfare could be exerted in response. This chapter begins with an assessment of these 'rights-based' causes of war, before discussing other key motivations including honour, government policy, magnate rivalries, mercenary culture, and religion.

In 1986, Brown analysed feuding culture from a broad Scottish perspective and often adopted a quantitative approach to causes and origins of conflict.⁴ Defining a single cause for conflict, whether feuding or war, is often an oversimplification as an array of contingent factors were generally involved in outbreaks of warfare. Although the different causes discussed below represent a rough hierarchy of importance in terms of the causes of war, it should again be emphasised that few conflicts can be distilled down to one single catalyst.

2.1: Land Disputes

Conflicting rights to land were perhaps the most common cause of violence in the West Highlands and Isles. Disputes often went unresolved for decades, creating enduring tension.

¹ John Mair, *A History of Greater Britain*, ed. Archibald Constable (Edinburgh, 1892), 48-9

² Smout, *History*, 43-4, 104-6; Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 7.

³ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 216.

⁴ Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 277-9.

As explored in Chapter 5, a near century-long dispute over Glenelg was contested between the MacLeods of Harris and the Frasers, and later drew in the Clanranald and the Campbells of Auchinbreck. Simmering tension existed between the MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacLeods of Harris over the lands of Trotternish in Skye (as discussed in Chapter 7), and the Camerons and Mackintoshes over Glen Loy and Loch Arkaig,⁵ while the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and MacLeans of Duart fought over the Rhinns of Islay for much of the second half of the sixteenth century. All of these disputes eventually escalated into reciprocal violence and bloodfeuds. Once the vendetta took precedence, the issue of land was easily obscured and downplayed, but it was probably the principal catalyst for the initial violence in these cases. Brown has claimed that *Blàr Tràigh Ghruinneart* in 1598, the culmination of the feud between the MacDonalds and MacLeans, was an example of ‘casual and explosive’ violence caused by the ‘universal carrying of weapons’ within Scottish society,⁶ but this ignores the backdrop of enduring tension over control of Islay.

Landholding could be justified through a number of different and often opposing concepts. Firstly, *còir a’ chlaidhimh* (or ‘sword right’) was a form of lordship based on sheer strength of arms.⁷ In 1549, Dean Monro observed that the isles of Raasay and South Rona rightfully belonged ‘be heritage’ to the Bishop of the Isles, but were held ‘be the sword’ by MacGille-Chaluim on behalf of MacLeod of Lewis.⁸ Furthermore, Monro noted that the castle in Loch Gorm on Islay pertained to the MacDonalds of Dunivaig ‘of auld, now usurpit’ by MacLean of Duart.⁹ The second form of landholding was the Scottish concept of ‘kindly tenants’, i.e. the hereditary right of tenants to continuously occupied land.¹⁰ This was somewhat similar to the more complex Gaelic concept of *dùthchas*: attachment to land or ‘unity between land, people, and culture’.¹¹ Macinnes has argued that clan attempts to ‘align’ *oighreachd*, a third form of landholding based on charter grants and titles, with their *dùthchas* ‘created the grounds for feuding’, but his interpretation of the latter term as ‘heritable trusteeship’ is somewhat oversimplified.¹² Warfare could be sparked by conflicting claims based on *còir a’ chlaidhimh*, ‘kindlieness’, *dùthchas*, or *oighreachd*, with force of arms occasionally being the deciding factor in these debates. For example, the contest over the Rhinns of Islay between the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and

⁵ NRS: GD176/84/85/187; GD176/268.

⁶ Brown, *Noble Power*, 130.

⁷ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 216.

⁸ *Monro’s Western Isles*, 70.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰ R.W. Munro, ‘The Clan System – Fact or Fiction’, in MacLean, *Middle Ages in the Highlands*, 124.

¹¹ *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 392-3

¹² Macinnes, *Clanship*, 3, 6, 38, 41.

MacLean of Duart was eventually settled in battle in 1598 when the two sides failed to negotiate a settlement. In the talks before the battle, MacLean claimed his right stemmed from ‘ane new lease and right be the Kings Controller’, while MacDonald invoked ‘ancient right, title and possessioun’. MacDonald then reportedly offered that eight of his ‘friends’ and eight of MacLean’s party should ‘meet betwixt the armies to decerne to whome those lands of the Rinnis were most kindlie’. Knowing that the terms of this mediation were rigged against him as they were predicated on ‘kindlieness’, MacLean refused, and battle soon ensued.¹³

The government could cause or exacerbate land disputes through confusing and contradictory charter grants. Trotternish in Skye, for example, underwent a series of grants to various clans between 1495 and 1507, with the inevitable consequence of land disputes.¹⁴ Similarly, McLean has suggested that the MacLeans and the MacDonalds both held valid charters to the same lands on Islay.¹⁵ The loss or deliberate destruction of charters held by clans could aggravate these conflicts.¹⁶ Throughout the sixteenth century, the MacLeods of Harris’ claim to the lands of Glenelg was contested by the Clan Fraser, and latterly the Clanranald. The legal basis of the MacLeods’ case was seriously undermined by the disappearance of their instrument of sasine during the internecine dispute that erupted after the death of their chief Uilleam in 1551. Argyll, the sponsor of Uilleam’s successor Tormod, was reportedly furious, and warned the new MacLeod chief that his ‘negligence... would caus ye Lord Lowett [to] steale fray all ye petendit richt and entris’ to the lands of Glenelg.¹⁷ With no legal challenge forthcoming from MacLeod, the Clan Fraser and the Clanranald were free to hold Glenelg by force. Loss of charters severely inhibited legal recourse, almost necessitating military retaliation in the event of the occupation of their lands. Of course, the viability of *còir a’ chlaidhimh* was dependent upon the relative strength of the parties involved, and if a kindred could not (or would not) challenge militarily, their lands could be occupied for decades, as shown by the MacLachlans’ ‘violent occupation’ of the Lamonts’ lands of Auchenahall for around forty years,¹⁸ and the Clanranald’s occupation of Glenelg from the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁹

¹³ ‘Ane Descriptione of Certaine Pairts of the Highlands of Scotland’, in *Geographical Collections*, Vol. II, 189-90.

¹⁴ Jane Dawson, *Scotland Re-formed, 1488-1587* (Edinburgh, 2007), 72.

¹⁵ W.K. McLean, ‘The Maclean-Macdonald Feud: Disputed Landholdings in Islay in the Sixteenth Century’, *TGSI* 56 (1988-90), 236-7.

¹⁶ Jean Munro ‘Gunpowder and Sealing Wax: Some Highland Charter Chests’, *TGSI*, 44 (1964-6), 52-3.

¹⁷ *The Book of Dunvegan*, Vol.I, ed. R.C. MacLeod (Aberdeen, 1938), 72-3.

¹⁸ *Lamont Papers*, 64, 106.

¹⁹ *Infra*: 147-54.

Land disputes were more overtly tied to ideas of honour than other causes of war because land was ‘never viewed simply as an economic resource, but...as the essential foundation of all noble power’.²⁰ It was therefore extremely dishonourable for a chief or noble to lose ‘any part of the territorial core’ that had been acquired by his ancestors.²¹ Certain core estates were considered ‘inalienable’.²² In the dispute between Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart and Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig in 1598, the ancestors of both chiefs had inhabited parts of Islay.²³ Given that Islay had been the heartland of the MacDonalds for centuries, stretching back to the Lordship of the Isles, the prospect of losing the island to MacLean may have been so shameful for Sir Seumas as to be almost unbearable. This view was encapsulated by Sir Seumas in 1615 when Islay was later granted to Campbell of Cawdor:

...I will die befor I sie a Campbell posses [Islay].²⁴

2.2: Succession and Inheritance

A period of general instability and uncertainty tended to follow the installation of a new chief, prompting internal leadership challenges or external incursions by rival clans. Uncles, younger sons, or illegitimate offspring were often poised to challenge for the leadership of the clan, perhaps due to the endurance of the principle of tanistry in the Highlands and Isles.²⁵ In comparison to primogeniture, the other main mode of succession, it is often thought that tanistry caused more immediate turmoil upon the death of a chief, as leadership contests were legitimised by the practice. Primogeniture, however, carried its own negative implications: a clan could face a long, unstable minority, and additionally, younger sons of clan leaders with little prospect of land inheritance could be forced to turn to banditry.²⁶ Bannerman has suggested that the two principles may have been strategically used in different circumstances, with tanistry being employed in chiefship succession, while primogeniture was standard in land succession.²⁷

²⁰ *Campbell Letters*, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Cathcart, *Kinship*, 150 n. 69.

²³ In 1549, Dean Monro observed that Loch Gorm castle in Islay had been ‘usurpit’ by Eachann Mòr MacLean of Duart, even though he had renounced his claim to the Rhinns of Islay in 1546. Tensions still remained in 1574, when the earl of Argyll ‘compounded controversies’ between the two clans. See *Monro’s Western Isles*, 56; NRS: GD176/49; *CSPS*, Vol. V, 34.

²⁴ *HP*, Vol. III, 263-4.

²⁵ Bannerman, ‘Lordship of the Isles’, 226; Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 99-100, 113-4; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 70-1.

²⁶ Macinnes, *Clanship*, 32.

²⁷ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 100; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 71. Genealogical histories can make it difficult to parse the nature of chiefship succession as they tend to discredit rival branches with illegitimacy or manipulate the genealogy to show succession by primogeniture. See Cathcart, *Kinship*, 72-5.

Prime examples of the instability and low level warfare caused by succession are provided by the two branches of the MacLeods, Harris and Lewis. The death of Uilleam MacLeod of Harris in 1551 initiated a decade-long violent struggle for the chiefship of the clan.²⁸ Later in the century, the MacLeods of Lewis were internally divided by a prolonged contest between two rival heirs to the chiefship, as discussed below. In some cases, leadership challenges occurred for good reason, and the removal of an incompetent chief was seen as a necessary step for the welfare of the wider clan. As shown in Chapter 6, the killing of Sir Umfra Colquhoun of Luss by his younger brother Iain in 1592 appears to have been motivated not by jealous desire for inheritance and control, but from a lack of faith in his brother's haphazard leadership.

The prevalence of secular or irregular marriage in the Highlands and Isles was a recipe for internecine strife, as shown vividly by the situation within the Clanranald in 1577.²⁹ Additionally, the collapse of the MacLeods of Lewis in the early seventeenth century, although undoubtedly exacerbated by the attempted colonisation of Lewis by the Fife Adventurers,³⁰ was hastened by the clan's 'partial implosion' in the 1560s and 1580s through a succession crisis caused by irregular marriage.³¹ After the breakdown of his first marriage c. 1541 to Janet, the daughter of MacKenzie of Kintail, Ruairidh MacLeod of Lewis disowned his eldest son, Torcuil Conanach, as illegitimate due to Janet's infidelity. Ruairidh then married Barbara Stewart, daughter of Lord Avondale, and soon named their son, Torcuil Oighre ('the heir'), as his heir.³² When Torcuil Oighre died at sea in 1566, a leadership challenge emerged, with Torcuil Conanach supported by his grandfather, Coinneach MacKenzie of Kintail. Ruairidh was captured, imprisoned, and forced to name Torcuil Conanach as his rightful heir. The dispute erupted again in 1585, when Ruairidh again dismissed Torcuil Conanach's right to succeed him as chief, naming in his stead Torcuil Dubh, a son begot from his third marriage, to a daughter of MacLean of Duart. This fresh controversy divided the MacLeods into two factions, and intermittent violence resulted in the death of several of Ruairidh's sons on both sides of the divide. Ruairidh remained clan chief until his death in 1596, but his named successor, Torcuil Dubh, was then challenged once again by Torcuil Conanach. A retaliatory raid launched by Torcuil Dubh on Torcuil Conanach caused the former to be denounced as a rebel by the Privy

²⁸ For one version of the consequences, see *Bannatyne Manuscript*, Vol. II, 129-131.

²⁹ *Infra*: 147-54.

³⁰ MacInnes, *Clanship*, 61; Julian Goodare, 'The Statutes of Iona in Context', *SHR* 77, (1998), 54.

³¹ MacGregor, 'Statutes', 136, 139; William Matheson, 'The MacLeods of Lewis', *TGSI* 51 (1978-80), 331; MacCoinnich, 'Siol Torcail', 7.

³² MacCoinnich, 'Siol Torcail', 13-5.

Council (probably at the instigation of MacKenzie of Kintail, Torcuil Conanach's grandfather). Torcuil Dubh was then captured and executed by MacKenzie in 1597, but his cause was upheld by his three sons and his brother, Niall.³³ This lasting upheaval fundamentally weakened the clan from within, and before it could regroup, the external challenge of the Fife Adventurers was brought to bear. As the eldest son, Torcuil Conanach would have felt entitled to succeed his father. Illegitimacy was not necessarily considered a barrier to leadership in the Highlands and Isles, although on this occasion it was the pretence Ruairidh required to disown his son. The most distinguished example of an illegitimate son rising high within a clan was Iain Muideartach, chief of the Clanranald, a position achieved by both merit and birth. Nevertheless, it is interesting that Iain was legitimised by the government in 1531, and it may suggest that this would have further secured his position in the eyes of the wider clan. Indeed, Iain's illegitimacy may well have been one basis for Ragnall Gallda's leadership challenge in the 1540s.³⁴

Even the benign intentions of a standard marriage alliance could create unrest some years later. For example, in early 1546, Lachlann MacLachlan and Gilleasbuig Campbell of Auchinbreck launched a joint legal bid to gain possession of Iain Lamont's 'Intres' [landed estate] of Inveryne by petitioning the Lords of Council. Their maternal grandfather was Iain of Inveryne (d. 1500-08), uncle of the incumbent Lamont chief, and Iain (the elder) had two daughters: one married Lachlann's father, the other Gilleasbuig's father Dubhghall. In court, the Lords of Council favoured Iain Lamont due to his possession of a charter from James V. The MacLachlans and the Campbells, unhappy with the legal outcome, then employed violence to further their claim, killing Gilleasbuig Lamont of Stillaig, the brother of Iain the chief, in a raid in May 1546.³⁵ Small-scale raiding and occasional killings continued in Cowal for at least a generation.³⁶ As explored in Chapter 8, a similar situation led to recurring internecine feuds within the Clan Cameron in 1569 and 1612-3, as the progeny of Eòghann and Iain Dubh, the younger sons of Eòghann mac Ailein (d. 1546), born of his second marriage, challenged the chiefships of his grandson Dòmhnall Dubh and great-grandson Ailean. Their claims first led to the murder of Dòmhnall Dubh in 1569, and then later resulted in Ailean ambushing and killing 20 of his opponents in 1613.

³³ *HP*, Vol. II, 266-7; Gregory, *History*, 208-10, 213-4, 220-1; *RPC*, Vol. II, 534, 728; MacCoinnich, 'Siol Torcail', 13-5; MacGregor, 'Statutes', 124-5.

³⁴ *Infra*: 133.

³⁵ *Lamont Papers*, 54-7, 64; *AT*, IV, 195; *HP*, Vol. IV, 64.

³⁶ *Lamont Papers*, 98-9.

2.3: Honour

As shown in Chapter 1, honour, both personal and clan, was a paramount concern in the Highlands and Isles. Much like their Lowland counterparts,³⁷ the Gaelic elite was extremely sensitive to perceived slights, especially to their reputation. According to Hugh MacDonald, at a feast held by the Lord of the Isles in the fifteenth century, three of his guests – MacLean of Duart, MacLeod of Harris, and MacNeill of Barra – ‘went out in a rage’ vowing vengeance after Iain MacDonald, tutor to the Clanranald heir, bade them to ‘sit as they please’ because they were ‘upstarts’ with pedigrees of dubious provenance.³⁸ This was a particularly offensive insult in a culture that venerated lineage, history, and ancestry.³⁹ According to Hugh MacDonald, MacLeod of Harris ravaged the Clanranald’s lands of Moidart on his homeward journey and the two clans were ‘never [again] intimate or in good terms’.⁴⁰ Perhaps the most notable example of honour relations instigating conflict from our immediate time period is the feud between the MacLeods of Harris and the MacDonalds of Sleat. As detailed in Chapter 7, conflict was initiated by the repudiation of Màiri MacLeod, the sister of Ruairidh Mòr MacLeod of Harris, by her husband Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat. Oral tradition has probably embellished the nature of the incident,⁴¹ but there can be no doubt that the humiliation struck deep at the heart of the MacLeods’ sense of clan honour. While the repudiation may alone have been sufficient catalyst, the fraught relations of the two clans in previous years must have contributed to the ire that was kindled in 1601. Additionally, it is easy to overlook the fact that MacDonald of Sleat may have felt his own personal honour had been insulted when MacLeod of Harris, his brother-in-law, renounced their alliance to align with his rival, MacLean of Duart.

As also discussed in Chapter 7, the MacLeods of Harris were heavily defeated by a company of English horsemen when they landed in Ireland on mercenary service in August 1595. Sixteen ‘gentlemen...two or three of them very special gentlemen’ were killed.⁴² The MacLeods’ allies the MacDonalds had suffered their own defeat, having capitulated to the English and returned to Scotland, but MacLeod of Harris stayed on in Ireland for some

³⁷ Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 21-22, 23-6, 28; *Campbell Letters*, 9.

³⁸ *HP*, Vol. I, 45-6.

³⁹ Sellar, ‘Highland Family Origins’, 103.

⁴⁰ *HP*, Vol. I, 46.

⁴¹ Alexander Cameron, *The History and Traditions of the Isle of Skye* (Inverness, 1871), 57-8.

⁴² *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 683, 687.

months ‘in great anger for revenge, if possible, for such scathe and dishonour he has gotten’.⁴³ The loss was not only felt by the chief, Ruairidh, but by all of his kin:

He and his whole people are so stirred to anger by their last dishonour that they have vowed never to leave Ireland if it be not repaired to their contentment.⁴⁴

The MacLeods eventually returned to Scotland after helping Ó Domhnaill capture the castle in Costello from the English.⁴⁵ The untimely deaths of some of the clan’s highest nobility demanded a violent, retaliatory response from their chief. Ruairidh would have accepted this responsibility to save face and redeem lost honour, but his military action against the English was probably also compelled by personal grief and a genuine desire for revenge.

Vengeance, an aspect of honour culture, was an undeniably powerful motivating factor for contemporaries. Breatnach has demonstrated that the murder of Shane Ó Néill in 1567 by the MacDonalds of Dunivaig was an intricately plotted and premeditated retaliation for their defeat at Ó Néill’s hands at the battle of Glenshesk in 1565.⁴⁶ In 1602, MacKenzie of Kintail provoked MacDonald of Glengarry to violence by killing two of his kinsmen. Rather than seek reparations from the government in Edinburgh, Glengarry ‘went about, at his own hand, to revenge the slaughter of his kinsmen’, and as a result, he was declared a rebel.⁴⁷ The extreme nature of the massacre of MacLean of Duart’s kinsmen in 1586 by MacDonald of Dunivaig undoubtedly stemmed from the dishonour he had endured and his desire for vengeance. The MacDonald chief had negotiated with MacLean in good faith to avert a feud between his brother-in-law MacLean and his cousin MacDonald of Sleat, but was imprisoned in Duart Castle indefinitely until he renounced his rights to Islay in MacLean’s favour. An account written c. 1620 claims that upon his release, MacDonald ‘receiving the wrong at Maclean his hand... went about, by all means, to revenge the same’,⁴⁸ culminating in the cold-blooded killing of between 40 and 80 of MacLean’s kinsmen over a number of days.⁴⁹ Later in August 1598, the young Eachann MacLean supplicated the king for justice for the killing of his father Lachlann Mòr by the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 687.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 687.

⁴⁵ *AFM* 6, M1595.15-7.

⁴⁶ Caoimhín Breatnach, ‘The Murder of Shane O’Neill: Oidheadh Chuinn Chéadchathaigh’, *Ériu*, 43 (1992), 159-75; Ciaran Brady, ‘The killing of Shane O’Neill: some new evidence’, *The Irish Sword*, 15 (1982), 116-23.

⁴⁷ *History of the Feuds*, 69-70; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 248.

⁴⁸ *History of the Feuds*, 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32-5; *RPC*, Vol. IV, 160; *Historie of King James*, 218-222; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 189-90; Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 92-3.

MacDonalds of Dunivaig, but James VI dismissed his case, claiming the battle was ‘well fought on both sides’.⁵⁰ Some years later, in the summer of 1602, Eachann invaded Islay with a force of 1,500 men, banishing Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig from the island, and finally achieving retribution for his father’s death.⁵¹ The English diplomat George Nicolson, a keen supporter of the MacLeans, commented: ‘God send good news of sound revenge!’.⁵²

Most of these examples have focused on shame and dishonour, yet the positive attainment of honour was also a key catalyst. In a report from early 1596, Dioness Campbell, the Dean of Limerick, suggested that during military campaigns in Ireland the MacLeans and Campbells should be divided into respective ‘garrizons, to be comaunded and directed by the Generall in severall partes for service’. Campbell claimed that this

...syperation shall brede an emulation betwene them, stryvinge for honor and creditt, and earnest desire to gaine and benefitt themselves upon the enemy.⁵³

Friendly competition between clans could be encouraged to maximise efficiency and enthusiasm on military campaigns.

2.4: Clan Expectation

Young heirs were poised to inherit more than just the estates of their predecessors. Bitter bloodfeuds could endure over several generations, with hereditary hatreds passing from father-to-son and manifesting themselves in cycles of retaliatory violence. In Margaret Campbell’s testimony on the assassination of Iain Campbell of Cawdor on 4 February 1592, she describes the intense pressure faced by the young chief Seumas Campbell of Ardkinglas to ‘follow out’ his father’s feud with Cawdor. A clan council, consisting of members of his own branch of the Campbells, along with the Campbells of Auchavuilling⁵⁴ and George Balfour,⁵⁵ claimed that ‘the Laird of Caddel wes lyke to decourt’ [dismiss] Ardkinglas and his followers. They reminded the young chief of the scheme his father had ‘laid agains Caddel in his awine tyme’, which he had deemed to be ‘for the weill of his hous’. The young Ardkinglas protested, claiming it ‘wes owre great a

⁵⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 259, 262, 275.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1024, 1036-7, 1045.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1024.

⁵³ *Miscellany of the Maitland Club*, Vol. IV, Part I, ed. Joseph Robertson (Glasgow, 1847), 55.

⁵⁴ They are called ‘the bairnes of Auchavuilling’ in Margaret’s testimony, perhaps suggesting that they too were young men keen to prove their worth. See *HP*, Vol. I, 162.

⁵⁵ A close associate of Ardkinglas, who gifted him lands in Rosneath in c. 1595. See *HP*, Vol. I, 161 n. 3.

feud to bring on my hous', but this only encouraged further upbraiding from his cadet branch:

Thaireftir they answerit to me [Ardkinglas] that they were unhappy that had sic an man of unworthiness for a wyse and active man quha wes my father.⁵⁶

Ardkinglas was clearly being shamed for perceived timidity, which raises issues of honour. Patrick of Auchavulling pledged his undying support should Ardkinglas agree to prosecute the feud:

...Patrick of Auchavulling said...geif I tuik that matter in hand...theye wuld die and leif with me and, geif mister wer that I might not bruik the country, they wuld tak baniesment with me.⁵⁷

For all its apparent sincerity, this pledge of allegiance also contained a thinly veiled threat that placed Ardkinglas in an impossible situation: either continue a potentially damaging feud or forfeit the support of close allies and possibly face deposition. When Ardkinglas eventually acceded to the wishes (or demands) of his kinsmen, this tense exchange was somewhat soothed by Patrick of Auchavulling's assertion that the experience would 'make ane man' of Ardkinglas.⁵⁸ This suggests military action was clearly anticipated, and was considered a necessary step in Seumas' transition to adulthood and leadership of the clan. This episode provides a useful insight into the burden of responsibility borne by successors, and suggests that some young leaders were constrained or compelled by the ambitions of their allies or kinsmen. Another example of this can be found in 1543, when Uilleam Mackintosh, the young heir of Dunachton, made a bond of manrent with the earl of Huntly on behalf of himself and the Clan Chattan, and 21 leaders of that clan pledged to renounce their adherence to Uilleam if he broke the bond.⁵⁹

The ideological framework that underpinned the martial culture of the West Highlands imbued warfare with a degree of ritual and ceremony. This has been explored in Chapter 1, but may be further elucidated through a brief case study: the succession of the MacGregor chief, Griogair Ruadh in late 1562. Cailean Liath Campbell of Glen Orchy promised Griogair Ruadh the lands of Glen Strae on two conditions: his 'faithfull homage and service' to Cailean and his successors, along with the surrender of two of Griogair's

⁵⁶ *HP*, Vol. I, 162.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 260; Munro, 'Clan System', 126.

dependants who murdered Alasdair mac Eòghain Dhuibh. A letter written by Cailean Campbell of Ardkinglas to Cailean Liath in November 1562 stated that Griogair Ruadh would only accept these terms if he was allowed ‘the skaytht of fyif or sax merkis’ of Glen Orchy’s lands.⁶⁰ This stipulation was accepted by Cailean Liath with seemingly little hesitation. Ultimately just a week later, Griogair Ruadh decided to assert his military power in dramatic and violent fashion by murdering eight Campbells at an inn in Allt Girnaig and capturing several more in Kincairgie.⁶¹ This episode allows us to infer that the right to the ‘skayth’ [to harm or damage by physical action] of Campbell’s lands was integral to Griogair Ruadh’s initial succession and long-term viability as clan chief.⁶² Unconditional submission would have irrevocably damaged his position as chief, and securing permission to raid was perhaps the only way he could salvage his integrity. Ritualism aside, the idea that raids on the lands of an overlord could be conducted with the overlord’s tacit consent seems extraordinary, yet the symbolic value for the smaller clan was considerable as the raid would demonstrate that their chief still maintained a semblance of personal autonomy, however nominal. The fact that Cailean Liath readily agreed to Griogair Ruadh’s proposal suggests that raids of this nature had precedent, and were presumably tolerated in order to appease a vassal kindred. With the prospect of submission looming, a situation never endured by any of his predecessors, Griogair Ruadh may have concluded that the concession to raid Glenorchy’s lands would not be enough to placate his fellow kinsmen, especially with the added condition of surrendering the murderers of Alasdair mac Eòghain Dhuibh. All chiefs were expected to offer protection and therefore if Alasdair abandoned his dependants to Campbell justice whilst simultaneously submitting to Cailean Liath he would have almost undoubtedly faced leadership challenges. Therefore, Griogair’s eventual decision to spill Campbell blood had two clear messages. For the Campbells, it was a statement of his intention to resist. For the MacGregors, it was a vivid demonstration of his martial prowess and his commitment to protect his kinsmen.

In the early seventeenth century, there was a notable trend by which a chief’s leadership was internally challenged on the basis of his new fidelity to the Scottish crown. In 1610, members of the Clanranald revolted against their chief Dòmhnall,⁶³ in 1612,

⁶⁰ MacGregor, ‘Political History’, 230-1.

⁶¹ Ibid, 231-2.

⁶² *Dictionary of the Scots Language* < http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/scathe_v>

⁶³ *RPC*, Vol. VIII, 444-5; Julian Goodare, *The Government of Scotland 1560-1625* (Oxford, 2004), 241.

Lachlann MacKinnon of Strathardle was similarly challenged,⁶⁴ and in 1613/14, the Cameron chief Ailean was almost overthrown by two rival branches of his clan, as discussed in Chapter 8. According to the testimony of the three chiefs, the rebels had spurned their allegiance to God, the king, and their clan leader and continued ‘their accustomed trade of murthour, thift, soirning, and oppression’.⁶⁵ These ostensibly shared motivations may indicate that the Statutes of Iona in 1609 had stoked widespread fears that the old way of life in the Highlands and Isles was now under threat. However, in the case of the Camerons and possibly the Clanranald, the rebels also held claims to the chiefship and had previously come into conflict with the main kindred, which suggests that their professed motive of defending traditional clan values was a convenient excuse to disguise their true goal of overthrowing their chief.⁶⁶ Alternatively, the chiefs themselves may have been employing the language of civility to ensure that their disobedient kinsmen were censured by the government.⁶⁷

2.5: Mercenary Culture

Mercenary service in Ireland by clans in the West Highlands and Isles provided an invaluable source of income that strongly incentivised the militarisation of society. In the fading years of the sixteenth century, their services were pursued by the Irish chiefs Ó Néill, Ó Domhnaill, and Maguire, who were embroiled in a war against the English. In early 1594, the Irish chiefs offered the earl of Argyll a yearly pension of £8,000, raised later in the year to £10,000, in exchange for 2,000 soldiers.⁶⁸ When Argyll refused to get involved, comparable, if more frugal, offers were made to MacDonald of Sleat, MacLeod of Harris, MacDonald of Dunivaig, and the MacLeods of Lewis. Cash advances spurred their involvement. In April, the MacDonalds were sent £300 in ‘silver and silver work’, with the promise of another £600 (half of which was to be paid in armour, clothes, and horses) when they landed in Ireland.⁶⁹ In July, the MacLeods were sent £500 sterling.⁷⁰ Presumably this payment was kept by the chiefs and not distributed amongst the thousands of mustered mercenaries, and for the actual soldiers, any enrichment probably depended on the plunder taken on the actual campaign. As indicated by the elegy for Ruairidh Mòr

⁶⁴ *RPC*, Vol. IX, 324-5; Goodare, *Government*, 241.

⁶⁵ *RPC*, Vol. IX, 324-5.

⁶⁶ The same is perhaps true of the Clanranald rebel Iain mac Ailein mhic Ragnall, who was probably the descendant of Ragnall Gallda, usurper of the chiefship in the 1540s, as discussed in Chapter 5. See *RPC*, Vol. VIII, 444; MacDonald & MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, Vol. II, 311-12.

⁶⁷ *Infra*: 201-2.

⁶⁸ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 457-8, 476-7, 500, 518.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 581, 591, 650.

⁷⁰ Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces*, 246.

MacLeod of Harris, which details the Irish campaign in 1595, the attainment of ‘wealth and riches’⁷¹ or ‘booty of cattle’ was a very real prospect.⁷² Clearly, the mercenaries would not have become so frequently embroiled in the volatile and dangerous situation in Ireland unless the reward matched the risk.⁷³ In 1595, Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart noted that some English ‘commandaris’ trained in Ireland wanted the war in Ireland to continue indefinitely, presumably to protect their livelihood.⁷⁴ Given the lucrative nature of the trade, the Hebridean ‘redshanks’ may have held similar views, and this kind of war profiteering was a clear incentive for the Highlands and Isles to remain militarily active.

Outside of these economic pull factors, the mercenary trade was an outlet for the militarised elite that may have actually diminished conflict within Scotland. For example, the feud between the MacGregors and the Campbells was suspended while the former fought in Ulster with Somhairle Buidhe MacDonald in the summer of 1563.⁷⁵ This decrease in activity on the homefront may partly explain why in 1495 James IV agreed to provide the Irish chief Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill with 4,000 Gaelic soldiers, commanded by Alasdair MacLean of Duart.⁷⁶ Following the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493, the king may have been attempting to redirect the islanders away from internal warfare in Scotland and towards Ireland (although he was also probably hoping to forge links with the Irish chieftains with a view to countering English aggression). The battle of Flodden in 1513 halted that particular relationship and the Irish chiefs increasingly liaised with the earls of Argyll as brokers for Scottish mercenaries. Prendergast has argued that by 1560 Argyll had achieved nominal control over much of Ulster through shrewd marriage contracts and careful leasing of his mercenary forces.⁷⁷ By the end of the sixteenth century, the mercenaries’ continued involvement in Ireland was a source of considerable tension between Scotland and England, as the latter was trying to conclude its conquest of the island.⁷⁸

⁷¹ *AFM* 6, M1595.15.

⁷² Wilson McLeod, ‘Images of Scottish warriors in later Irish bardic poetry’, in Duffy, *Galloglass*, 172-5.

⁷³ As mentioned above, in 1586 around 1,400 Gaelic Scots were massacred at Ardnaree. See *CSPI*, Vol. III, 161, 164; Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces*, 174-5, 355-6.

⁷⁴ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 170.

⁷⁵ *Campbell Letters*, 56, 79, 81-2.

⁷⁶ Muriósa Prendergast, ‘Scots Mercenary Forces in Sixteenth Century Ireland’, in *Mercenaries and Paid Men: The Mercenary Identity in the Middle Ages* ed. John France (Leiden, 2008), 369.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 363-82.

⁷⁸ Ross Crawford, ‘James VI and the end of the Irish mercenary trade in the West Highlands and Isles’, in *James VI and Noble Power in Scotland, 1578-1603*, eds Miles Kerr-Peterson & Steven Reid (Forthcoming).

Previously the mercenary trade has been understood as terminating in 1601/2,⁷⁹ or even as late as the Flight of the Earls in 1607,⁸⁰ yet evidence suggests that it was brought to an end earlier in 1595/6. Focused policing of the North Channel by the English navy was coupled with a decline in the mercenaries' importance as the Irish chiefs developed their own standing armies.⁸¹ A highly lucrative source of external revenue was removed, and hundreds of idle veteran warriors now turned inward. Dormant feuds reignited and an overall intensification of warfare in the Western Isles culminated in pitched battles between the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the MacLeans of Duart in 1598, and the MacLeods of Harris and the MacDonalds of Sleat in 1601. Additionally, MacGregor has suggested that this coincided with a shift towards 'total war' in solidarity with the escalating situation in Ireland.⁸² Macinnes has contended that the termination of the trade was a principal reason for a lack of large-scale massacres between 1590 and 1640,⁸³ but on the contrary, it caused a marked upswing in violence in the Highlands and Isles. For at least a decade, there was little attempt by the Scottish government to follow up the termination of the trade by tackling the underlying issue of militarisation in the Western Isles through programmes that harnessed this potential or promoted demobilisation.⁸⁴ Although the mercenary campaigns could cause or exacerbate tensions between participating clans, they also fostered a sense of unity and common purpose, perhaps evoking the heyday of the Lordship of the Isles. Clans with fractious relationships in the political milieu of Scotland often seemed able to set aside their differences to pursue a common goal in Ireland during the summer months. After 1595, that force for unity had disappeared.⁸⁵

2.6: Government Policy

The government's approach to obtaining authority in the Highlands and Isles was typically quite limited and unimaginative. The crutch of the commission of lieutenancy, often given to magnates like Argyll and Huntly, was hindered by the political agendas of the chosen

⁷⁹ Macinnes, *Clanship*, 58, 67-8; Goodare, 'Statutes', 56; MacCoinnich, 'Conflict and Identity', 154-5. Rumours continued to circulate as late as 1601 that Tyrone was seeking the redshanks' services, but if any crossed the North Channel, they were much reduced in number. See *Calendar of the Carew manuscripts*, Vol. III, eds J.S. Brewer & William Bullen (London, 1867), 272; Vol. IV, 49.

⁸⁰ Dawson, 'The Gaidhealtachd', 266.

⁸¹ Crawford, 'Irish Mercenary Trade'.

⁸² MacGregor, 'Warfare', 211.

⁸³ Macinnes has argued that the mere existence of the mercenary trade perpetuated conflict as it formed 'a ready reservoir of manpower to perpetuate feuds'. See Allan I. Macinnes, 'Slaughter Under Trust: Clan Massacres and British State Formation', in Levene, *Massacre in History*, 129-130.

⁸⁴ MacGregor, 'Civilising Gaelic Scotland', 40.

⁸⁵ From around 1618, the Scandinavian mercenary market may have filled the vacuum of the Irish mercenary trade, although this was a more Scottish-wide phenomenon. See Steve Murdoch, 'More Than Just "Mackay's" and Mercenaries: Gaelic Influences in Scandinavia, 1580-1707', *TGSI* 60 (1997), 161-85 at 164-71.

lieutenants, who tended to put their own interests before that of the government, while exploiting the legal authority bestowed by the office. A similar strategy was the commission of fire and sword, a programme of ‘licensed violence’ that provided clans in crown favour with legal indemnity to prosecute their feud.⁸⁶ Conflict was therefore legitimised rather than terminated. Violence ‘licensed’ within these parameters was theoretically unrestricted and could ‘all too easily provide a cloak for private expansionist ambitions’.⁸⁷ Accordingly, these commissions were regularly abused by Highland nobles. In 1593, the Galbraiths used a commission against the MacGregors to prosecute their feud against the Colquhouns and the MacAulays.⁸⁸ Similarly in 1618, Mackintosh of Dunnachton used a commission against the Camerons to hold the earl of Huntly’s tenants in Lochaber and Badenoch ‘undir a slavische thraldome’, an abuse of power that precipitated conflict between the Mackintoshes and the Gordons.⁸⁹ Thus, commissions of fire and sword could stoke rather than extinguish feuds in the Highlands and Isles.

The government frequently bemoaned the lawless nature of the ‘wild’ Highlands and Isles whilst simultaneously exploiting local feuds in the region to destabilise political rivals and opponents. For example, in 1543, Regent Arran released the imprisoned Clanranald chief Iain Muideartach along with other ‘Irish’ to divert the attention of Argyll and Huntly, supporters of his main rival, Cardinal Beaton.⁹⁰ As a consequence, Iain led the Clanranald against the Frasers in one of the largest clan battles of the sixteenth century in the following summer. In 1565, Queen Mary stoked the feud between the MacGregors and Campbells ‘in order to embarrass and encumber the latter’, who had opposed her during the ‘Chaseabout Raid’.⁹¹ Wrong-footing Argyll was also Regent Morton’s objective in 1574 when he fuelled a land dispute between the Clanranald and the MacLeods of Harris in Glenelg by granting an escheat to the former, which provoked small-scale raiding in the region.⁹²

Expropriation of ‘troublesome’ kindreds increasingly became the government’s main solution to the lack of answerability in the Highlands and Isles, a policy that met with resistance from the incumbent kindreds.⁹³ Perhaps the most notable example of this policy

⁸⁶ MacCoinnich, ‘Conflict and Identity’, 151.

⁸⁷ Martin MacGregor, ‘Highlands and Islands, and central government: 1500-1625’, in *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, ed. Michael Lynch (Oxford, 2001), 296.

⁸⁸ *RPC*, Vol. V, 74-6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 456-7, 559.

⁹⁰ *Infra*: 134.

⁹¹ MacGregor, ‘Political History’, 254-7.

⁹² *Infra*: 147-8.

⁹³ Macinnes, ‘Slaughter Under Trust’, 130.

was the plantation of Lewis. This was pursued by a government that had long sought to exploit the untapped wealth of the Outer Hebrides (especially fisheries),⁹⁴ an economic incentive buttressed by a desire to ‘civilise’. The arrival of the Fife Adventurers in Stornoway in 1598 initiated a long period of bitter violence that contributed significantly to the dissolution of the MacLeods of Lewis as a political entity by 1615.⁹⁵ Other ‘problem’ areas in the Highlands and Isles had been ‘earmarked’ for plantation, including Lochaber and Trotternish in Skye.⁹⁶ In 1598, expropriation of the kindreds on these lands was a bridge too far, but between 1607 and 1612 the MacDonalds of Dunivaig were dispossessed of their lands in Kintyre and Islay to the benefit of the Clan Campbell. Such abrupt dislocation made restoration and recovery of land the principal motivation for the ‘Islay Rising’ in 1615, discussed in Chapter 9. Similarly, the extirpation of the MacGregors may have eventually ‘subdued’ the clan but it resulted in the ‘death of many of them and their followers, and no lesse (iff not farr greater) slaughter of the Campbells’.⁹⁷ Overall, the short-term consequence of this policy of expropriation was a visible upsurge of violence and rebellion, as well as an intensification of warfare. In the longer term, Macinnes has argued that conflict and disorder had significantly declined by the early seventeenth century,⁹⁸ but the continuing disaffection of the dispossessed MacDonalds was a driving narrative of the wars of the 1640s and beyond.

2.7: Magnate Rivalries

The earls of Argyll could be effective arbitrators of disputes between other clans, and their reputation for military supremacy, coupled with their usual status as crown favourites, shielded many of their adherents from potential conflict. The mere threat of repercussions dissuaded incursions, as indicated by Robert Bowes’ comment in 1596 that ‘few of the Isles in Scotland or on the frontiers in Ireland towards Argyll will fight and draw blood against the Campbells’.⁹⁹ Magnates like Argyll could also actively foster upheaval for their own benefit. Although enthusiastic participants in royal armies at Flodden, Pinkie, and Glenlivet, the earls of Argyll otherwise took little direct involvement in military affairs in the West Highlands and Isles.¹⁰⁰ Cattle raids were presumably beneath them, and their recurrent role as lieutenant of the Isles meant they were often under scrutiny to behave in an outwardly lawful manner. Proxy warfare was their *modus operandi*: subordinates were

⁹⁴ MacCoinnich, ‘Conflict and Identity’, 142-3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145-7, 149; *HP*, Vol. II, 265-79.

⁹⁶ *RPS*, 1598/6/5; *RPC*, Vol. V, 462-3.

⁹⁷ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 247.

⁹⁸ Macinnes, ‘Slaughter Under Trust’, 130.

⁹⁹ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 198.

¹⁰⁰ Boardman, *Campbells*, 335.

ordered to launch raids on opponents, allowing the earls to achieve their goals while maintaining plausible deniability and detachment. An upsurge in proxy warfare may be visible towards the end of the sixteenth century, which again may have contributed to the intensification of warfare around this time. An obvious proponent of this strategy was Gilleasbuig Gruamach, the seventh earl (d. 1638), as shown in Chapter 6. In 1603, Argyll induced the MacGregors to launch attacks on neighbouring clans, including the Colquhouns, to undermine the position of the Duke of Lennox, his rival for the lieutenancy of the Isles.

The earl of Huntly, Argyll's counterpart and frequent rival in the central and eastern Highlands, favoured a similar strategy for extending his authority. In the 1540s, George Gordon, the fourth earl of Huntly, probably supported a Fraser-led takeover of Iain Muideartach's Clanranald chiefship,¹⁰¹ and his grandson, the first Marquis of Huntly, certainly backed an attempted coup against Ailean Cameron of Lochiel's chiefship in 1613.¹⁰² Both of these incidents ended in failure for Huntly and his allies, while fostering serious upheaval within Moidart and Lochaber. The complicity of these magnates can be difficult to ascertain as they maintained an assiduous detachment from the actual violence, yet Boardman has recently suggested that the Argyll-Huntly rivalry had already made the Western Isles a political battleground by the early sixteenth century, with the first Dòmhnall Dubh rebellion in 1501 engineered by Argyll to stymie the growing power of Huntly.¹⁰³ Although their relationship was not always antagonistic, the Argyll/Huntly rivalry intensified throughout the sixteenth century, reaching an inconclusive climax at the battle of Glenlivet in 1594. Smaller clans, such as the Camerons, could be used as pawns in a game of political one-upmanship between these two powerful magnates. As seen in Chapter 8, when Ailean Cameron of Lochiel broke his allegiance to Huntly c. 1610-12 in favour of aligning with Argyll, Huntly sponsored the internal challenge of Ailean's chiefship by the Erracht and Glen Nevis branches of the Camerons.

2.8: Religion

One possible factor that could conceivably have instigated violence was religion, but even though this period coincided with the Scottish Reformation, there is little overt evidence for religious division causing conflict in the Highlands. As observed by MacCoinnich, the battle of Glenlivet in 1594 has been erroneously portrayed as a confessional conflict between the Catholic Huntly and the Protestant Argyll, when the battle-lines were actually

¹⁰¹ *Infra*: 131-43.

¹⁰² *Infra*: 199-205.

¹⁰³ Boardman, *Campbells*, 279-81, 311-13, 316-17.

drawn according to traditional loyalties and rivalries rather than religious affinity.¹⁰⁴ Religion may have nevertheless played a quiet role in defining inter-clan relations and rivalries. The fervent reforming activities of Gilleasbuig, the fifth earl of Argyll (d. 1573) could have contributed towards the growing ideological gulf between the Campbells and clans like the MacDonalds who remained Catholic.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart was a Protestant, which may have intensified his feud with the MacDonalds of Dunivaig over Islay.¹⁰⁶ Equally, the conversion of Gilleasbuig, the seventh earl of Argyll (d. 1638) to Catholicism in 1618 was the foundation upon which an unlikely friendship was built with his old opponent, Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig, while they were both in exile in the Spanish Netherlands.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the confessional divide that defined the warfare of much of continental Europe during this period is conspicuously absent as a major cause of violence in the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland.

2.9: Conclusion

Land disputes and succession crises appear to be the most prevalent causes of conflict within the West Highlands and Isles between 1544 and 1615. In many cases, these causes were exacerbated by other contingent issues, such as government interference or magnate rivalries, but control of land and kindred was undoubtedly a recurrent instigator of violence, especially when coupled with deeply held views on honour. The military ethos of elite clan society may have instigated conflict, with chiefs expected to carry out ritual cattle raids and hereditary feuds with their neighbours. Other factors, such as mercenary culture or religion, played a subtler and more ambivalent role in the causation of warfare. Although the former was predicated upon the militarisation of elite male society, it may actually have diminished conflict within Scotland, at least until it was terminated near the end of the sixteenth century, at which point, the militarism it had instilled was a contributory factor to the intensification of warfare around 1600.

¹⁰⁴ MacCoinnich, 'Conflict and Identity', 159-160.

¹⁰⁵ *Scots Peerage*, Vol. I, 340-3.

¹⁰⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 260; Vol. XII, 403; *Stirling Presbytery Records, 1581-1587*, ed. James Kirk (Edinburgh, 1981), xxiv, 146, 148-9.

¹⁰⁷ *RPC*, Vol. XI, 468, 507.

Chapter 3: Armies and Soldiers

There is general acceptance in the historiography that the Highlands and Isles were more heavily militarised than other regions of Scotland in the sixteenth century, but analysis of the scale and composition of forces has been scattered and limited.¹ Brown's recent study of the martial role of the Scottish nobility is a useful reminder that military affairs remained a core focus of noble culture, but his discussion of the Highland soldier is hampered by use of unhelpful terminology and repetition of misinterpreted evidence, as discussed below.² Similarly, Dawson's studies of the fifth earl of Argyll (d. 1573) have strongly emphasised the importance of his private military strength in Scotland and Britain,³ yet evidence suggests a more nuanced picture of the Campbells' martial power than Dawson provides. This chapter will provide a more systematic assessment of the soldiery in the West Highlands and Isles than has been previously attempted. Initially adopting a broad view, it will assess the military capacity of the region by contrasting the vision offered by recent historiography with a series of English and Scottish government reports from 1545, the 1590s, and the early 1600s. It will then analyse a number of more specific issues, including recruitment, army supply, army composition, and military equipment. This last theme has received the most attention from historians such as Phillips and Caldwell, but both employ a limited source-base that generally overlooks contemporary poetry, Irish annals, and certain key governmental records, all of which will be consulted here.⁴ Overall, this chapter will offer a clearer view of the nature of armies and soldiers in the Highlands and Isles by taking a more inclusive approach towards the available sources.

3.1: Military Capacity of the West Highlands and Isles

In recent scholarship, the military capacity of the Hebrides in particular has been hugely exaggerated, perhaps to align with negative perceptions about the level of violence in the region. One scholar's claim that c. 35,000 seasonal 'redshank' mercenaries served in Ireland at the end of the sixteenth century has found at least one other proponent.⁵ As will

¹ Brown, *Noble Power*, 126-7, 135; Jane Dawson, 'The Fifth Earl of Argyle, Gaelic Lordship, and Political Power in Sixteenth-Century Scotland', *SHR*, 67 (April, 1988), 3.

² Brown, *Noble Power*, 126-7, 135.

³ Dawson, *The Politics of Religion*, 51-6; Dawson, 'Gaelic Lordship', 3.

⁴ Phillips, 'In the Shadow of Flodden', 179-81; Caldwell, 'Having the right kit', 144-68.

⁵ Donal Dorrian, "'The Cockpit of Ireland': Northwest Ulster 1540-1603' (Unpublished BA thesis, TCD, 1985), 5; James Lydon, 'The Scottish Soldier in Medieval Ireland: The Bruce Invasion and the Galloglass', in *The Scottish Soldier Abroad, 1247-1967*, ed. Grant G. Simpson (Edinburgh, 1992), 12.

be shown, this multiplies the probable military capacity of the Hebrides fivefold.⁶ English government reports are one of our most useful sources on the size and composition of Hebridean armies. According to one such report, Dòmhnall Dubh led an army of 4,000 ‘men of war’ on 180 galleys into Ireland in the summer of 1545, while another 4,000 men stayed in Scotland to ‘entangle with’ Huntly and Argyll.⁷ In total therefore, Dòmhnall Dubh promised the service of 8,000 men for Henry VIII, although he requested that 3,000 men be waged by the English king because they were ‘gentlemen [who] must be sustained and helped’. He agreed to maintain ‘the rest’ at his own expense.⁸ Therefore, the 3,000 waged ‘gentleman’ soldiers in Dòmhnall Dubh’s army represent slightly over one-third of his total force of 8,000 men, a recurrent ratio in other sources, as will be shown.⁹

In the 1590s, a flurry of English government reports provided estimates on the military capacity of the Hebrides in an attempt to control the flow of the mercenary trade. The first, written anonymously in Scots in 1593 for William Cecil, Elizabeth I’s chief advisor, was called ‘The note of the Weste Isles of Scotland’.¹⁰ It begins by estimating the size and military muster of individual islands in the Hebrides, before detailing the various political controversies and affinities in the West Highlands and Isles in general. The total musters of each clan/nobleman is collated in Table 1.

Clan(s)/Nobleman	Muster of men
MacDonald of Sleat	1,500
MacLeod of Lewis	1,040
MacLeod of Harris	680
MacDonald of Dunivaig	550
MacLean of Duart	530 (+ c. 1,200 for Mull and Tiree?) ¹¹
Clanranald	390
The earl of Argyll (and Campbell of Glenorchy)	360
MacKinnon of Strath	160
MacLean of Coll	140
MacDuffie	100

⁶ For comparison, the armies at Flodden in 1513 (c. 26-30,000 men) and Pinkie in 1547 (c. 26,000) were probably the two largest ever fielded by Scotland. See Phillips, ‘In the Shadow of Flodden’, 165-7; Gervase Phillips, ‘Scotland in the Age of the Military Revolution, 1488-1560’, 186.

⁷ *Letters and Papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII*, Vol. XX (2), 54-5, nos. 120-1; D.G. White, ‘Henry VIII’s Irish Kerne in France and Scotland’, *The Irish Sword*, 3 (1957-8), 213-25.

⁸ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, Vol. XX (2), 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253-5.

¹¹ MacLean of Lochbuie and MacLean of Coll would presumably also have mustered men on Mull. In ‘The Description’, MacLean of Duart could muster 600 on Mull.

MacQuarrie	60
Laird of McKynvin	50
Stewart of Appin	30
MacDougall of Lorn	30
MacLean of Lochbuie	20
Murray ‘Ycolmkyll’	20
MacIain of Ardnamurchan	16

Table 1: Estimated Muster of the Hebrides (by clan) in ‘The note of the Weste Isles of Scotland’, 1593¹²

This report was later updated in the better known ‘The Description of the Isles of Scotland’, which MacGregor has dubbed a ‘military census’.¹³ The anonymous report, written c.1595,¹⁴ possibly by Dioness Campbell, Dean of Limerick (or the Edinburgh merchant John Cunningham),¹⁵ builds upon and refines the information and muster estimates from the earlier 1593 report which it appears to use as a basis.¹⁶ Appendices 1.1 and 1.2 provide a full breakdown of the available manpower in the Hebrides as estimated by both ‘The note’ and the ‘The Description’, but some of the data is worthy of discussion here.

Clan(s)/Nobleman	Muster of men
MacDonald of Sleat	1,520-1,524
MacLean of Duart	1,386-1,390
MacLeod of Lewis	1,040
MacDonald of Dunivaig	650
MacLeod of Harris	560
Lord Hamilton	400
Clanranald	386-7
MacNeill of Barra	200
MacLean of Lochbuie	200
MacLean of Coll	190
MacKinnon of Strath	160

¹² *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253-4.

¹³ Martin MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 220.

¹⁴ Skene states it cannot have been written later than 1595, as Iain (John) Stewart of Appin died in that year. See W. F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III (Edinburgh, 1890), 440.

¹⁵ David Caldwell, ‘An Intelligence Report on the Hebrides, 1595/6’, *West Highland Notes & Queries*, 23 (October 2013), 3.

¹⁶ Some of the estimates are exactly the same in both reports, yet the 1593 report fails to specify to whom Mull and Tìree pertained (namely the MacLeans). Although ‘The Description’ concentrates on the economic and military capabilities of the Isles, estimating their value and potential mustering of ‘gude men to the weiris’, it also provides some interesting anecdotal detail, which may be based upon Dean Monro’s report from 1549. See Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 431; Crawford, ‘Massacre of Eigg’.

MacDougall of Lorn	160
The earl of Argyll	120
MacDuffie	100
Stewart of Appin	60
MacQuarrie	60
Laird of McKynvin	50
Laird of Ardinwrthe	16

Table 2: Estimated Muster of the Hebrides (by clan) in ‘The Description of the Isles of Scotland’, c. 1595¹⁷

These estimates may not be exact, but they provide a fairly plausible indication of the relative strengths of each clan. According to ‘The Description’, the MacDonalds of Sleat sit at the top of the pile in terms of potential muster at 1,500 men, almost matched by the MacLeans of Duart at c. 1,390 men. Other large musters include the MacLeods of Lewis (1,040 men), the MacDonalds of Dunivaig (650 men), and the MacLeods of Harris (560 men). It is important to note that for the latter two clans, musters from their mainland holdings (such as Glenelg for the MacLeods, and Kintyre for the MacDonalds) were excluded from both reports, and as a result, their total muster would most probably rival the other ‘big three’.¹⁸ Overall, the combined total of militarised personnel in the Isles is c. 7,000 men (6,876 in 1593 and c. 7,080 in 1595), although both sources later contradict this by claiming that the total muster was generally regarded to be 6,000 men.¹⁹

Contrary to Brown’s assertion, not all of these soldiers were *daoine uaisle* (‘gentlemen’) or as Brown calls them, rather misleadingly, ‘professional gallowglass’.²⁰ Both the 1593 and c.1595 reports stipulate that only one-third or c. 2,000 men were equipped with ‘attounes [aketons] and haberchounis [haubergeons], and knapshal bannets [bascinet]’.²¹ These men were probably *daoine uaisle*. In the 1593 report it was expressly stated that the remaining two-thirds or c. 4,000 men would use bows or, with increasing regularity, firearms.²² Thus it is worth emphasising that the majority of soldiers in the average Hebridean army may have been lightly-equipped bowmen or gunners, an idea

¹⁷ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 428-440.

¹⁸ If we assume that MacLeod of Harris and MacDonald of Dunivaig could each muster c. 1,000 men, then the total number of fighting men available to the Hebridean clans may have approached 8,000.

¹⁹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253-4; Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 439. The only major difference between the 1593 and 1595 reports is the inclusion in the latter of the Hamiltons’ lands in Bute and Arran (totalling 400 men).

²⁰ Brown, *Noble Power*, 126. The *gallóglaigh* (or galloglass) was a very specific group of elite mercenary warriors from the Hebrides who settled in Ireland from the thirteenth century.

²¹ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 439; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 254.

²² *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 254.

further discussed below. Interestingly, the ‘History of the MacDonalds’ claims that before the battle of Harlaw in 1411, Dòmhnall, the Lord of the Isles, ‘raised the best of his men, to the number of 10,000, and chose out of them 6600, turning the rest of them to their homes’.²³ This number is remarkably consistent with these later government reports, but importantly, it also implies that around 3,000 of the levied men were considered unfit or unequipped for battle. Overall, the military capacity of the Hebrides may have fluctuated considerably over the years, but a total muster of 8,000 men seems entirely possible when the region was united under, or attempting to restore, as in 1545, the Lordship of the Isles.

The Campbell earls of Argyll meanwhile have been singled out by Dawson as possessing the most powerful private military force in Britain and Ireland by the later sixteenth century, allowing them to act as powerbrokers.²⁴ Dawson has claimed that Gilleasbuig, fifth earl of Argyll (d. 1573) could raise an army of 1,500 professional soldiers and a levy of between 6,000 and 12-15,000 armed men in the 1560s.²⁵ These estimates should be treated with a reasonable degree of caution. First of all, these huge armies did not represent his ‘private’ military strength as they were mustered as part of the kingdom’s standing army at battles like Solway Moss in 1542, Pinkie in 1547, and Glenlivet in 1594. More problematically, the higher estimates of 12-15,000 men originate from dubious sources. Before Solway Moss, a series of increasingly frantic English spy reports claimed that the Scottish army totalled 100,000 men of which 12,000 were Highlanders led by Argyll.²⁶ After the battle, the English reported more soberly that the Scottish army numbered c. 17,000 men in total ‘as they sey theym selvis’.²⁷ The other high estimate of 15,000 men is associated with the Scottish army led by Argyll that opposed the English occupation of Haddington in 1548. Gervase Phillips, drawing upon the English chronicler Raphael Holinshed, claims that ‘Argyll and his fifteen thousand Highlanders’ joined the French camp at Musselburgh in August 1548.²⁸ Holinshed’s original report is quite different:

...there came to the aid of the Frenchmen foureteene or fifteene thousand Scots, accounting herewith the Irish Scots which came with the earle of Argile.²⁹

²³ *HP*, Vol. I, 29.

²⁴ Dawson, *The Politics of Religion*, 51-6; Dawson, ‘Gaelic Lordship’, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶ *Hamilton Papers*, Vol. I, ed. J. Bain (Edinburgh, 1890), lxxiii, lxxi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 317-8; Cameron, *James V*, 319.

²⁸ Phillips, *Anglo-Scots Wars*, 237-8

²⁹ *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, Vol. III, (London, 1808), 905.

Furthermore, Jean de Beaugué’s account corroborates that 14-15,000 Scots arrived at Musselburgh

...comptant les savauges, qui etoyent venuz avec le conte d’Arquil...

...counting the savages, who came with the earl of Argyll...³⁰

Both sources clearly imply that only a proportion of the Scottish relief force were Highlanders. Phillips’ misinterpretation of Holinshed has been subsequently repeated by Dawson, and latterly Brown.³¹ Tellingly, in 1567 Argyll was only willing to commit himself to raising a more modest 5,000 men for Queen Mary.³² Furthermore, the seventh earl of Argyll (d. 1638) was later able to raise a similar amount of men (c. 6,000) for the battle of Glenlivet in 1594.³³ It should also be emphasised that the muster of the Campbells of Argyll would fluctuate between different earls and within the lifetime of an individual depending on the strength of their alliances and kin group. Overall however, the idea that Argyll could raise 12-15,000 men seems extremely unlikely. Around half of that number, c. 6,000 men, seems much closer to the truth and an army of this size may only have been possible as part of a royal summons. Nonetheless, it is difficult to disagree with Dawson’s comment that raising a private force of 1,000-1,500 men was a ‘routine matter’ for Argyll, even at very short notice in the fraught political climate of 1595.³⁴

Another important source for the military strength of Argyll and indeed the West Highlands in general is a ‘vappenshawing’ ordered by James VI on 31 January 1602, which was intended to muster 2,000 men for service in Ireland.³⁵ Table 3 provides a breakdown of the amount of men to be mustered by each clan and nobleman.

Clan(s)/Nobleman	Muster of men
Campbell of Argyll and Campbell of Glenorchy	300
Duke of Lennox	200
MacDonald of Clanranald	200
The Marquis of Huntly	100

³⁰ Jean de Beaugué, *Histoire de la Guerre D’Ecosse*, ed. Maitland Club (Edinburgh, 1830), 62; *History of the Campaignes*, 55.

³¹ Dawson, *Politics of Religion*, 52; Brown, *Noble Power*, 126.

³² *CSPS*, Vol. II, 393-4; Dawson, *Politics of Religion*, 53. Argyll’s muster was nonetheless substantially larger than his allies – the Hamiltons, the earl of Huntly, the earl of Crawford, and Lord Herries – each of whom agreed to muster 1,000 men.

³³ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 459.

³⁴ Dawson, *Politics of Religion*, 52; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 636, 642-3, 677; Crawford, ‘Irish Mercenary Trade’. See also *RPC*, Vol. VI, 517.

³⁵ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 941-2.

MacKenzie of Kintail	100
The earl of Atholl	100
Mackintosh of Dunnachton	100
Grant of Freuchie	100
Fraser of Lovat and Munro of Foulis	100
The earl of Sutherland and MacKay	100
The earl of Caithness	100
Ross of Balnagowan	100
MacDonald of Glengarry	100
Cameron of Lochiel and MacDonald of Keppoch	100
Campbell of Lundy	50
The laird of Tullibardine	50
The laird of MacGregor	50
The abbot of Inchaffray	50
TOTAL:	2,000

Table 3: Estimated Muster of Highlands in 1602³⁶

Most of the Hebridean clans were excluded due to their ‘unwillingness’ to serve against the Irish.³⁷ Some of the muster estimates seem very low, particularly the combined total of 300 men for Campbell of Argyll and Campbell of Glenorchy. Typically, Argyll would have been entrusted by the king to raise and lead an army for this service, but he was currently out of favour with James VI and his political rival, the duke of Lennox, was the king’s lieutenant in the Isles.³⁸ It may be that these figures represent the personal/private strength of each clan at short notice, as they were only given a month to raise the troops.³⁹ It is important to note that only Argyll, Glenorchy, Lennox, and the Abbot of Inchaffray were physically present to agree to these terms; the other musters were mere estimates based on the clan’s expected military strength.⁴⁰

To summarise the discussion so far, if we assess the 1593, 1595, and 1602 evidence holistically, a conservative estimate of the total available manpower in the West Highland mainland and the Inner and Outer Hebrides is between 9,000 and 10,000 men.

³⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 941-2.

³⁷ One of Glenorchy’s tenants protested that he would not ‘serve against that people they were come of and whose language was one with theirs, but be true to them against the Saxons [English]’. See *Ibid.*, 926, 937.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 902, 926, 937.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 941-2.

⁴⁰ It does not appear that the army actually served in Ireland.

Extrapolating the ratio found in several sources that one-third of armies was composed of more well-armed soldiers,⁴¹ it may be assumed that at least 3,000 were *daoine uaisle* or clan ‘gentlemen’.

The estimates from the government reports in 1593 and 1595 probably represent approximately the maximum number of men that each individual clan could raise, and in reality, the scale of martial action in the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland varied considerably depending on the situation. As discussed in Chapter 4, the cattle raid, the most common form of warfare in the region, typically involved forces numbering in the tens rather than the hundreds.⁴² Despite the huge potential at the disposal of the Campbells, most situations did not warrant mass mobilisation of thousands of soldiers. The fifth earl’s successor, Gillesbuig’s half-brother Cailean, sent just 60 soldiers to raid Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart in May 1579.⁴³ The MacLeods of Lewis are a useful example for further illustrating the variability in the scale of warfare. In 1598, Niall MacLeod of Lewis led 40 men ‘all bodin in feir of weir’ in two boats to seize a ship in Loch Broom owned by John Pullet and Robert Blair, burgesses of Perth,⁴⁴ yet the clan could muster 200-300 men for resistance against the Fife Adventurers,⁴⁵ and 800 men for service in Ireland in 1595.⁴⁶ Some raiding parties were comprised of only a handful of men when a premium was placed on stealth,⁴⁷ but others were between 30 and 40 men strong. In 1601, 40 men were sent by MacLeod of Harris to raid Carinish in North Uist, where they fought an even smaller MacDonald force. Notably, this was not a minor cattle raid, but was part of a serious feud between the two clans.⁴⁸ Even while on mercenary campaigns, soldiers were divided into companies of 30 or 40 men, probably the average capacity of a *birlinn*.⁴⁹ Thus these companies may well have been dedicated galley crews, a group of men that knew each other and worked together on the same vessel. Evidence from the Dòmhnall Dubh rising in 1545 implies that clans had dedicated sailors distinct from their warriors, as 1,000

⁴¹ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, Vol. XX (2), 86; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253-5; Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 439; ‘Account of the Battle of Balrinnes, 3d of October 1594’, in *The Spottiswoode Miscellany*, Vol. I, (Edinburgh, 1844), 264.

⁴² *Campbell Letters*, 45.

⁴³ *RPC*, Vol. III, 94-5.

⁴⁴ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 245.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 245-6.

⁴⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 684. The MacLeods of Lewis’ muster was estimated at c. 1000 men c. 1595. See Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 428-440.

⁴⁷ *HP*, Vol. II, 272-3.

⁴⁸ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244.

⁴⁹ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 103; A.D.M. Forte, ‘A Preliminary Account of an Early-Sixteenth Century Episode of Highland Piracy’, *SGS*, 24 (2008), 208-9.

men in Dòmhnall Dubh's army of 4,000 men were deemed 'mariners' who were not paid by the English.⁵⁰

The upper limits of the considerable military potential of the Highlands and Isles were only rarely explored, either in times of political crisis or, increasingly in the Isles, to meet the demands of the mercenary trade in Ireland. The clans that participated in the trade in the late sixteenth century, including the MacDonalds of Sleat, MacDonalds of Dunivaig, and the MacLeods of Harris, consistently raised substantial armies of thousands of men in successive summers.⁵¹ The mere existence of a mercenary trade may suggest that there was a surplus of manpower in the Highlands and Isles, although the trade was a vocation and a tradition, not to mention a hugely profitable enterprise. It is perhaps debatable if the mercenary trade truly tapped into a pre-existing surplus, and indeed it seems possible that the rising demand for mercenaries attracted ever more men to take up arms. However, the idea that fighting men were the most valuable export of the Hebrides is perhaps typified by the dowry of Lady Agnes Campbell of Kintyre for her marriage to Turlough Luineach Ó Néill in 1569: she landed in Ulster with 1,000 Campbell and MacDonald soldiers who entered the service of her new husband.⁵²

3.2: Military Recruitment

A clear and fundamental difference between the warfare in Scotland and Ireland was the latter's heavy reliance on mercenaries hired from the former.⁵³ The relationship was not generally reciprocal.⁵⁴ In Scotland, clan strength was generally self-contained, although other kindreds could be hired in times of upheaval: in 1563 and 1570, the Campbells of Glenorchy recruited some Camerons to pursue the Clan Gregor.⁵⁵ More formal arrangements existed in which some smaller kindreds acted as the military arm of another clan. Examples of this relationship include the MacGregors to the Campbells of Argyll and the Campbells of Glenorchy,⁵⁶ the MacRaes to the MacKenzies of Kintail,⁵⁷ the MacNeills of Barra to the MacLeans of Duart,⁵⁸ and (to a certain extent) the MacLeans of Duart to the

⁵⁰ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, Vol. XX (2), 54-5, nos. 120-1; 86.

⁵¹ English reports generally estimated 'redshank' armies at between 2-3,000 men. See Rixson, *Galley*, 101; Edwards, 'Escalation of violence', 52 n.69.

⁵² Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces*, 106-7; *CSPI*, Vol. I, 415.

⁵³ Simms, *From Kings*, 125-7.

⁵⁴ One exception to the rule almost took place in 1596, when Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig negotiated with Tyrone to obtain troops to defend himself against MacLean, an attempt that, had it succeeded, would have reversed the usual flow of mercenaries from Scotland to Ireland. See *CSPI*, Vol. VI, 30.

⁵⁵ *Campbell Letters*, 182, 43, 46, 178.

⁵⁶ MacGregor, 'Political History', 60-1, 71; *Campbell Letters*, 55.

⁵⁷ *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society*, Vol. IV (Edinburgh, 1926), 214.

⁵⁸ NRS: RD1/27/21; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 255, 688; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 35-7.

Campbell earls of Argyll.⁵⁹ The number of men provided in these arrangements could be very substantial, as in 1595, when MacLean of Duart claimed that his ‘dependaris’ the MacNeills of Barra would provide him with 300 men in wartime.⁶⁰ Certain kindreds may have specialised in a particular aspect of warfare: according to tradition, the MacInneses in Skye were hereditary bowmen to the MacKinnons of Strath.⁶¹ Importantly, these militarised kindreds were not itinerant mercenaries, as in Ireland,⁶² but had their own established territorial domain. Other clans had more informal arrangements, but did on occasion provide military support in desperate times. For example, during MacKenzie of Kintail’s feud with the MacDonalds of Glengarry, the earl of Sutherland ‘by reasone of the old friendship and amitie betuein his familie and the Clankeinzie’ sent 240 men led by John Gordon of Embo.⁶³

Certain areas may have been particularly geared towards military recruitment. The ‘Description’ claims that Sleat in Skye was ‘occupiet for the maist pairt be gentlemen, thairfore it payis but the auld deuteis’ of victuals, food, and drink.⁶⁴ Notably, it boasted the highest total muster of any single area in the Hebrides at 700 men. It might be expected that the more productive and fertile lands would be able to support a greater number, yet Trotternish in Skye was actually estimated at a higher rental value than Sleat: 70 merklands compared to 30 merklands. Victuals may have been redirected from elsewhere within MacDonald of Sleat’s lordship to maintain these ‘gentlemen’, as discussed below.

Strong, unified clans could draw upon a collective pool of manpower for deployment on demand, and this may have been the true strength of the Clan Campbell in particular. For example, the Campbells of Glenorchy were frequently reinforced by their fellow Campbells and allies in Argyll throughout their feud with the MacGregors.⁶⁵ As shown in Chapter 5, the Clanranald also relied heavily upon their kin-ties with the MacDonalds of Glengarry and the Clan Cameron in their struggles in the 1540s. The Campbells used a tax system for the mustering of troops: one man, serving for 8-10 or 20 days, was to be provided for every merkland held by the laird or chief.⁶⁶ Military service could wax and wane depending on the relative strength and power balance of the kindreds

⁵⁹ Crawford, ‘Irish Mercenary Trade’.

⁶⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 35, 37.

⁶¹ MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 54.

⁶² Simms, *From Kings*, 19, 126-8.

⁶³ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 248. These troops may have in fact been supplied out of necessity due to Kintail’s government commission. See *History of the Feuds*, 70-1.

⁶⁴ *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 432.

⁶⁵ *Campbell Letters*, 44-5.

⁶⁶ *Campbell Letters*, 45.

involved. For example, the earls of Argyll were the ‘ultimate controlling influence’ behind the MacGregors, and between 1513 and 1550, the Campbells of Glenorchy were denied their military service as they had been ordered by Argyll to serve Campbell of Cawdor.⁶⁷ The Campbells’ reliance on military service from other clans may explain why the musters of Argyll and Glenorchy were so low in 1602.

In the maritime world of the Hebrides and the west coast of the Highlands, lordship was configured through an intertwined ‘network’ of sea-lanes and coastal castles.⁶⁸ Captains of castles and local baillies were obliged to maintain defensive garrisons within the castle, as well as *bírlinnean* or galleys, for the use of their lord. Castle garrisons were generally very small, often numbering only a handful of men. For example, it was the duty of the captain of Dunstaffnage to maintain ‘sex homines [six men]’ at all times.⁶⁹ In 1615, before the ‘Islay Rising’, the royal garrison at Dunivaig Castle was only around three or four men.⁷⁰ These relatively modest garrisons may suggest that sieges were not anticipated, however, small garrisons could hold out for long periods, and victualling large bodies of fighting men was a clear economic burden. In fact, the Highlands were far from anomalous in this regard, as small garrisons were fairly standard in medieval and late medieval Europe, especially in peacetime.⁷¹

Along with garrisons, captains of castles were expected to maintain galleys or *bírlinnean* for the use of their chief in the ‘Wars of our Supreme Lord the King and in our private wars’.⁷² In September 1573, the earl of Argyll outlined that Donnchadh Campbell MacIver, captain of Inveraray and baillie of Glenara, must

...keep and maintain a small birling or galley of 16 oars in our earldom with the rest of our ships, just as the Bailies of Glenara have been accustomed to do in past times for us and our predecessors.⁷³

On 7 July 1578, Iain Campbell, captain of Dunoon, was ordered by Argyll to maintain a ‘galley of 10 oars’ and an unspecified number of ‘men at arms’ sufficient enough to make

⁶⁷ MacGregor, ‘Political History’, 60, 92.

⁶⁸ Boardman, *Campbells*, 56.

⁶⁹ *HP*, Vol. III, 199, n.1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 141-2; Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 369.

⁷¹ Christopher Duffy, *Siege Warfare* (London, 1979), 1-3; David Cornell, ‘English Castle Garrisons in the Anglo-Scottish Wars of the Fourteenth Century’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Durham, 2006); Fergus Oakes, ‘The Nature of War and its Impact on Society during the Barons’ War, 1264-7’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015), 82-5.

⁷² *Argyll Transcripts*, VII, 41.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, VI, 203.

the vessel seaworthy.⁷⁴ Similarly, on 3 September 1582, Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig granted land to his son Gilleasbuig in exchange for his homage and the service of a ‘galay or rather a langfad [*long-fhada* or longship, also known as a lymphad] of 24 oars well provisioned with victual and with men for rowing’.⁷⁵ Therefore, in the case of coastal castles, galley service clearly implied that fighting men must also be mustered. The size of these ships appears to have varied significantly, as indicated by a government report completed during the ‘Islay Rising’ in 1615:

Ane galley is ane veshell of xviiij airis and abone to xxiiij airis; ane birling is a veshell of xij airis and abone to xviiij airis. The birth of ane gallay and birling and the number of men of weir quhilk thay ar able to carrye is estimate according to the number of their airis, compting three men to every air.⁷⁶

Therefore, a fully manned *bírlinn* would carry between 36 and 54 men, while the larger galley (or *long-fhada*) could carry between 54 and 72 men.⁷⁷ Dòmhnall Dubh’s army of 4,000 ‘men of war’ was transported to Ireland on 180 galleys, which equates to an average of around 22 men on each vessel.⁷⁸ These ships ensured that the sea was no barrier for the fighting men of the West Highlands and Isles.

3.3: Army Supply

Supplying armies of hundreds or even thousands of men could exert a huge strain on the resources of any clan. In a short-term campaign in enemy territory, such as Argyll’s pursuit of Huntly in 1594, the attacking army would plunder the surrounding land for victuals, which had the added effect of injuring the enemy. In 1596, MacLean of Duart planned to use this strategy in a prospective campaign in Ireland.⁷⁹ Fighting men were also forcibly billeted on tenants from an enemy clan,⁸⁰ and indeed in supposedly ‘friendly’ territory in the Lowlands. Spy reports from 1542 claim that the Highland troops stationed in the Lowlands before the battle of Solway Moss ‘dystroyed as moche corne and other goodes, withoute paynge any thyng therefore, as the army of England dyde within Scotland,

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, VII, 41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 94; *Dictionary of the Scots Language* <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/mauch_n_1>

⁷⁶ *RPC*, Vol. X, 347-8. Defined terminology for each ship ‘type’ remains a contested point. See Forte, ‘Highland Piracy’, 208, 213 n. 8; Rixson, *Galley*, 64-78; Murdoch, *Scottish Maritime Warfare*, 2-3, n. 7.

⁷⁷ The *bírlinn* of 16 oars to be maintained by the captain of Inveraray could have carried a maximum of 48 men, but it is likely that his castle garrison was much smaller than this.

⁷⁸ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, Vol. XX (2), 54-5, nos. 120-1; Rixson, *Galley*, 64.

⁷⁹ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 170.

⁸⁰ *HP*, Vol. II, 37-8; *Taymouth Bk*, 237-8; *Dunvegan Bk*, 183; R. A. Dodgshon, “‘Pretense of blude’ and ‘place of thair duelling’: the nature of Scottish clans, 1500-1745”, in *Scottish Society, 1500-1800*, eds R. A. Houston & I.D. Whyte (Cambridge, 1989), 192.

wherof the comonaltye of Scotlande complayne varay sore'.⁸¹ Similarly, in 1547, before the battle of Pinkie, Argyll's Highlanders caused controversy because they 'waist and distroyis all menis gudis quharever thay cum'.⁸² These reports suggest that Highland armies probably did not travel with substantial baggage trains, with the soldiers instead living off the land they travelled through to maintain speed and mobility.⁸³

Perhaps more problematic was supplying an army on home turf for an extended length of time. Many chiefs maintained a core bodyguard, traditionally twelve men,⁸⁴ the *lèine-chneis*, and these men depended upon the food rent from their chief or hospitality from the wider clan. As noted by 'The Description', the people of Lewis were obliged to provide 'Cuidichies [*cuid oidhche*], that is, feisting thair master quhen he pleases to cum in the cuntrie, ilk ane thair nicht or twa nichtis about, according to thair land and labouring'.⁸⁵ Warriors outside of the elite retinue were maintained by the clan's tenants, a custom known to the government as *sorning* that, in Dodgshon's view, was much abused in the sixteenth century.⁸⁶ On Islay, for every merkland owned, tenants were expected to

...sustein daylie and yeirlie ane gentleman in meit and claith, quhilk dois na labour, but is haldin as ane of their maisters household men, and man be sustenit and furneisit in all necessities be the tennent, and he man be reddie to his maisters service and advis.⁸⁷

In what may be a droll allusion to the burden and abuse of *cuid oidhche*, the report states that the chief has a right to 'spend...ane nicht (albeit he were 600 men in companie) on ilk merk land'.⁸⁸ The government's attempted crackdown on this custom ostensibly aimed to unburden the 'commonys' from one of a 'panoply of parasites' that fed off the tenantry,⁸⁹ but the extent to which this social practice was truly resented by the tenants is debatable.⁹⁰

⁸¹ *Hamilton Papers*, Vol. I, lxxi-iii.

⁸² *CSPS*, Vol. I, 9.

⁸³ Similar complaints were made about the French troops stationed in Dundee in 1552. See Alec Ryrie, *The Origins of the Scottish Reformation* (Manchester, 2006), 142.

⁸⁴ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244; MacGregor, 'The Lament', 142, 148 n. 61; Macinnes, *Clanship*, 57, 67.

⁸⁵ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 429.

⁸⁶ Dodgshon, 'West Highland Chiefdoms', 30.

⁸⁷ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 438.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 432.

⁸⁹ MacGregor, 'Statutes', 154; Dodgshon, 'West Highland Chiefdoms', 30-4; Dodgshon, 'The nature of Scottish clans', 189.

⁹⁰ *RPC*, Vol. X, 13-14, 818; MacGregor, 'Statutes', 166. As suggested by Dodgshon, when in 1613 tenants of Islay complained about the imposition of 'Irish laws' by their new landlord Ragnall MacDonald of Dunluce, the problem may not have been the actual 'laws' but the fact that Ragnall's men were not their kin. Alternatively, Ragnall may have 'squeezed tenants for as much as he could during his very short lease of the island'. See *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, ed. The Iona Club (Edinburgh, 1847), 160-1; Dodgshon, *Chiefs to Landlords*, 72,

In peacetime, these exactions may have been relatively sustainable, but with war came mass mobilisation of armed and hungry men. In 1595, Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat had mustered an army of around 3,000 men for service in Ireland, and after a few months, the army had ‘vrakit’ his lands. With all their ‘victual and furnishing spent’, ‘plain hunger’ forced them to leave Scotland for Ireland. The tenantry may have refused to provide any more victuals or, even worse, were genuinely bled dry.⁹¹ At the same time, MacLean of Duart had raised his own army of between 500 and 600 men in anticipation of resisting MacDonald of Sleat’s force. Although facing protests from his tenants, MacLean held his army together for three months, an ‘extraordinary’ effort according to his servant Auchinross. Payment from Queen Elizabeth was not forthcoming and MacLean was forced to dissolve his forces.⁹²

Some particularly fertile areas appear to have been used as a breadbasket to supply the fighting men elsewhere in a lordship. According to ‘The Description’, the island of Tiree was ‘callit in all tymes McConnells girnell [granary or storehouse]; for it is all teillit [tilled] land, and na girs [grass] but ley [arable] land’. When the chief arrived to take *cuid oidhche*, the victual was reportedly ‘sa great’ that the tenants were ‘uncertain...quhat...thai should pay, but obeyis and payis quhatevir is cravet be thair maister’.⁹³ Tiree’s muster was estimated at an impressive 300 men, yet the true value of the island may have been its natural productivity.⁹⁴

Mercenary campaigns in Ireland required the flow of money almost as much as the flow of victuals. Cathcart has observed that in the Dòmhnall Dubh rising, the issue of wages was a crucial factor during negotiations between the Islanders and the English,⁹⁵ and disagreements over pay may have resulted in the disbanding of the Hebridean army.⁹⁶ During the 1594 mercenary campaign, Ó Domhnaill was forced to abandon an active siege to ensure he obtained the Hebrideans’ service, as they threatened to ‘turn back to their

⁹¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 647-8.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 647-8. Maclean-Bristol has argued that MacLean’s prolonged maintenance of this army greatly exacerbated his clan’s debt. See Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 168-9, 194.

⁹³ *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 437.

⁹⁴ This is perhaps surprising considering that Islay has the reputation for being the most fertile of the Hebrides. See David Caldwell, ‘The Campbell Takeover of Islay – the archaeological evidence’, in *Ireland and Britain in the Atlantic World*, eds Audrey Horning and Nick Brannon (Dublin, 2009), 90-1.

⁹⁵ Alison Cathcart, ‘The Forgotten ’45: Donald Dubh’s Rebellion in an Archipelagic Context’, *SHR*, 91 (October 2012), 259-60.

⁹⁶ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 166-7.

country without dallying or delay' if he did not 'immediately retain them as he had promised'.⁹⁷

3.4: Army Composition

As discussed in Chapter 1, military affairs were a major concern for clan chiefs and their immediate retinue. Those farther down the social scale, tenants and minor lairds, are less well represented in the sources, but some did participate in military activity. We have seen already from the government reports that around one-third of armies were composed of *daoine uaisle*, a ratio roughly supported by a muster of Grant of Freuchie's 'heill kynne, freindis, and servandis' in February 1596. He raised 500 men of whom 300 were appropriately armed for the defence of his own lands, while only 80 were 'weill armorit as effeirris to pas to the Kingis wyris'.⁹⁸ After their botched landing in 1595, Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig left his son, Aonghas, in Ireland with 600 men, but Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart noted that 'three hundred are better than the six hundred, for there remained with him not a hundred of his father's men'.⁹⁹ This suggests that most of the elite retinue remained with the elder Aonghas, while his son was left with largely 'unprofessional' soldiers. In the same year, MacLean of Duart's secretary John Auchinross claimed that most of the MacDonalds' army was composed of 'householders, who will respect little their profit in Ireland besyid their loss in Scotland'. MacLean planned to harry their lands, forcing them to abandon their campaign in Ireland and 'seik for Scotland, every man to save his own house and dwelling'.¹⁰⁰ It is worth underlining the significant distinction between these 'householders' and the 'gentlemen' or *daoine uaisle*. Due to the custom of *cuid oidhche* and sorning, the 'gentlemen' did not have to worry about these kinds of attack on personal property, and therefore they were afforded greater freedom to campaign. In contrast, 'householders', who probably represented a considerable proportion of the large 'redshank' armies, may have been unwilling to serve in Ireland or elsewhere for an extended period of time while their homes remained undefended and their lands neglected.

One stratum of society expressly prohibited from engaging in warfare was the 'labourers of the ground':

⁹⁷ *The Life of Aodh Ruadh O Domhnaill*, Part One, ed. and trans. Paul Walsh (Dublin, 1948), 72-3. This also emphasised to the reader that Ó Domhnaill was a man of his word.

⁹⁸ *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 376-7; Brown, *Noble Power*, 138.

⁹⁹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 684.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 648.

And in raising or furthbringing of thair men any time of year to quhatsumevir cuntrie or weiris, na labourers of the ground are permittit to steir furth of the cuntrie quhatevir thair maister have ado, except only gentlemen quhilk labours not, that the labour belonging to the teiling of the ground and wyning of thair corns may not be left undone, albeit thai byde furth ane haille zeir, as oftentimes it happins quhen any of thair particular llands hes to do with Irland or neighbours, that the hail cuntriemen bides furth watching thair enemies ane zeir, half ane zeir, or thairby, as thai please. Not the les the ground is not the war labourit, nor the occupiers thair of are nather molestit, requirit, troublit, nor permittit to gang furth of thair awin cuntrie and Ile quhair thay dwell.¹⁰¹

These individuals were essentially tasked with maintaining the land while the fighting men were away to ensure that the chief could raise food rents when he returned. Clans seem to have based estimated musters on the number of ‘gentlemen’ or *daoine uaisle* that were available. Any accompanying men were incidental. For example, in June 1570 Iain Stewart of Appin promised to send Campbell of Glenorchy 18 men led by two named captains and ‘with als abill men of sa mony as beis in the cuntray’.¹⁰² The evidence suggests that a proportionally small core of elite soldiers existed within each clan, and mustered armies (especially those for service in Ireland) were composed of a considerable number of middling householders and tenants. Armies raised for service in Ireland seem consistently larger than those mustered for internal feuds in Scotland. Men may have been attracted by the prospect of plunder, and clan chiefs probably encouraged broader participation to drive up the price of their service.¹⁰³

‘Ordinary’ clan members are (unhappily) often only recorded in death, and even then the records are not always helpful. For example, when the Campbell of Glenorchy history, *The Black Book of Taymouth*, describes the execution in 1604 of Alasdair Ruadh MacGregor of Glenstrae and seventeen of his close kinsmen at the ‘mercat cros’ of Edinburgh, it states that ‘sundrie utheris [were] hangit thair and in uther places, quhais

¹⁰¹ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, 439-40.

¹⁰² *Campbell Letters*, 45, 109. McCormack has pointed out that in the ‘Red Book of Clanranald’ MacMhuirich distinguishes between the ‘núasle [agus] n tsluaig’ (nobility and host) in descriptions of battles in the seventeenth century. See Danielle McCormack, ‘Highland Lawlessness and the Cromwellian Regime’, in *Scotland in the Age of Two Revolutions*, eds Sharon Adams & Julian Goodare (Woodbridge, 2014), 115-34 at 120-1; *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 190.

¹⁰³ A chief like MacDonald of Sleat may have felt pressure to compete with the Irish chiefs’ true target, the earl of Argyll, and therefore he may have overpromised the amount of men he would muster.

names were superfluous to wrett'.¹⁰⁴ Only nobility were mentioned by name. Immediately following this, the book describes a skirmish at 'Bintoich' involving Donnchadh Campbell's second son, Raibeart, and a band of MacGregors, which culminated in the death of the 'principallis of that band': Donnchadh Abrach MacGregor of Ardchyle and his son Griogair; Dubhghall MacGregor of Glengyle and his son Donnchadh; and Teàrlach MacGregor of Braiklie. Twenty of 'thair compleissis slane in the chais' were not named.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, the disproportionately high number of deaths of the 'common sort' at the battle of Glenlivet passes with little comment in comparison to the small number of nobility who were killed.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the actions of the earl of Argyll in the immediate aftermath of Glenlivet emphasise that, on a personal level, these losses were keenly felt. Argyll honoured the dead of 'his people', around 500 men, by gathering and burying their bodies, and crafting makeshift monuments out of 'bowes and pladds',¹⁰⁷ a poignant tribute tied to his responsibility to protect the honour and integrity of his clan.

3.5: Military Equipment

What kind of military equipment did Highlanders and Islanders use in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century? As has been shown already, social status largely dictated the type of weaponry and armour available to a soldier. The classic accoutrement of the Gaelic warrior before 1500 consisted of a one-handed sword, a shield, throwing spears or 'darts' (usually two), and a long mail coat (*luireach*) or aketon for armour. By the sixteenth century, the archetypal equipment of a warrior in the West Highlands and Isles was quite different. Mail coats remained popular among elite infantry,¹⁰⁸ but sources overwhelmingly suggest that the two-handed *claidheamh mòr* ('great sword') was wielded in tandem with the bow, and latterly the gun, by Gaelic warriors. This section will assess in turn swords, bows and spears, axes, firearms, and armour.

The most celebrated weapon was the sword, which carried 'symbolic value...as an attribute of nobility' and political authority.¹⁰⁹ In poetry, it is repeatedly emphasised as the proper weapon for a warrior chief to wield and often acts as an extension of his physical strength.¹¹⁰ MacGregor has identified 'three distinct phases' in the use of the sword. The one-handed sword remained popular until around 1500 when it was 'supplanted' for the

¹⁰⁴ *Taymouth Bk*, 39.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 457-60; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 228.

¹⁰⁷ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 458.

¹⁰⁸ One-third of MacLean's vanguard of 3,000 islanders at Glenlivet in 1594 'were for the most part armed with coates of mail reaching to their knee'. See 'Account of the Battle of Balrinnes', 264.

¹⁰⁹ Caldwell, 'Having the right kit', 166; Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, 132-3.

¹¹⁰ *Scottish Verse*, 107-13; *Eachann Bacach*, 3, 5

remainder of the century by the two-handed sword. Government restrictions on the two-handed sword heralded the return of the one-handed version around 1600, although it may have made a comeback as early as 1581.¹¹¹ Changing trends in the design of monumental sculpture from the West Highlands reflect these different phases in the use of the sword. Two-handed sword motifs dominate sculpture from the sixteenth century, with outstanding examples including the effigies of Murchadh MacDuffie of Colonsay (d. 1539) and the MacLeod of Harris chiefs, Alasdair (d. 1547) and Uilleam (d. 1541/2).¹¹²

The use of the sword by Highlanders and Islanders in the sixteenth century distinguished them from their counterparts in Ireland, the galloglass, as shown in a description of Turlough Ó Néill's entourage in 1557:

...sixty grim and redoubtable gallowglasses, with sharp, keen axes, terrible and ready for action, and sixty stern and terrific Scots, with massive, broad, and heavy-striking swords in their hands, ready to strike and parry, were watching and guarding the son of O'Neill.¹¹³

A description of the MacLeod and MacDonald soldiers who served with Ó Domhnaill in Ireland in 1594 states:

Many of them had swords with hafts of horn, large and warlike, over their shoulders. It was necessary for the soldier to grip the very haft of his sword with both hands when he would strike a blow with it.¹¹⁴

This description of the sword held on the shoulder is extremely reminiscent of the stance of the man second from the left in Albrecht Dürer's famous woodcut of 'Irish' soldiers from 1521.

¹¹¹ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 224-5; James Hill, 'The Origins and Development of the "Highland Charge" c. 1560 to 1645', *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 53 (1994), 300.

¹¹² Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 97-9, 167-70, 121; pls. 26C, 34A, 34B, 34C. See also: 25C, 25D, 29A, 29C, 29D, 29F.

¹¹³ *AFM* 5, M1557.14.

¹¹⁴ *Life of O Domhnaill*, Part One, 72-3.

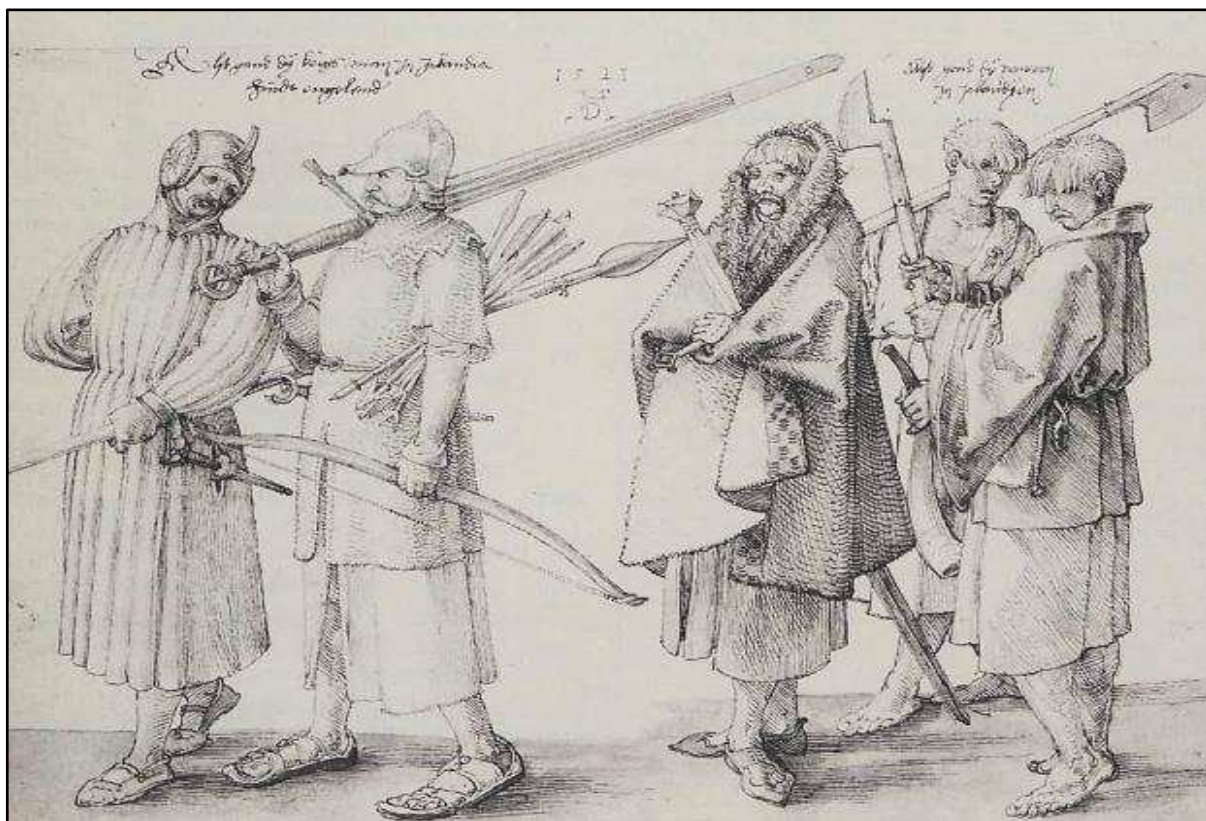


Figure 3: Albrecht Dürer's woodcut, 1521 (Creative Commons)

From this resting position, the sword could be swung to its fullest extent, and thus it was also a position of readiness.¹¹⁵ The main purpose of this stance however may have been as a suitably imitating display when the soldiers were in the entourage of the Irish chiefs. In battle, the swords were probably sheathed in a scabbard and slung over the back, especially if the soldier was also using a bow. Although Irish commentators consistently differentiated the galloglass from the 'redshank' mercenaries due to the visible differences in terms of equipment, their role on the battlefield was probably quite similar. The application of the *claidheamh mòr* on the battlefield was presumably as a space-clearing weapon: it would probably be swung in wide, broad strokes possibly directed at the more vulnerable lower torso and legs.¹¹⁶ These two-handed swordsmen acted as shock troops to clear a space for other warriors carrying smaller swords and dirks,¹¹⁷ and their application was therefore similar to that of the galloglass with their long-handled axes.¹¹⁸ The 60 redshanks described in 1557 were clearly an impressive and physically imposing group,

¹¹⁵ Interestingly, the *zweihänder* sword, the hallmark of the German *Landsknechte* mercenaries, was carried across the shoulder and was considered akin to a halberd.

¹¹⁶ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 136-7.

¹¹⁷ At Glenlivet, Gordon of Auchindoun was unhorsed and MacLean's troops 'sharply assailed him and with dirks stabbed him, and afterwards cut off his head'. See *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 460; *History of the Feuds*, 51-2.

¹¹⁸ It is perhaps unlikely that every warrior would have wielded the two-handed sword, as its wide swings posed a threat to friend as much as foe, but this drawback could have been averted via disciplined spacing between friendly combatants.

with a reputation rivalling the famous galloglass. Prendergast has observed that contemporaries often remarked that the Irish were ‘slighter in build and shorter than their Scottish mercenaries’.¹¹⁹ Wielders of the *claidheamh mòr* must have been very physically strong to swing these heavy swords for more than a few strokes, especially when wearing mail.

A two-handed sword would have been more expensive than, for example, an axe due to the amount of iron required for the long blade, and some historians have therefore suggested that they were only affordable for the wealthy elite.¹²⁰ However, at the massacre of Ardnaree in 1586, in which around 1,400 MacDonalDs were driven into the River Moy and killed, the English recovered between 300 and 400 of ‘their long swords’ from the riverbed.¹²¹ This strongly suggests that these swords were not exclusive items restricted for the elite, but were fairly common and widespread. The two-handed sword was not widely used elsewhere in Britain and Ireland, which made the Scottish Highlander and Islander a specialized soldier, as perhaps evidenced at the battle of Flodden.¹²² The adoption of the two-handed sword made shields superfluous, while heightening the usefulness of the bow.¹²³ Near the end of the sixteenth century, the single-handed sword and the circular *targaid*, or targe, began to be favoured once again, perhaps in response to the increasing effectiveness of firearms which were difficult to use in tandem with the two-handed sword.¹²⁴

The bow was of unarguable importance in war, and Wiseman has argued that ‘bows were the weapon of choice...for warfare and hunting’.¹²⁵ This is certainly accurate with regards to the latter pursuit, but in warfare the inseparable combination of bow and sword was paramount. In Classical Gaelic poetry, descriptions of the bow are scarce, as the throwing spear was ‘invariably associated’ with the elite.¹²⁶ Poetic descriptions of battles indicate that throwing spears were discharged by both sides at the outset and often mid-charge:

¹¹⁹ Prendergast, ‘Scots Mercenary Forces’, 365.

¹²⁰ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 167-9; Caldwell, ‘Having the right kit’, 166-7.

¹²¹ *CSPI*, Vol. III, 164. Hill has suggested that only one-quarter or around 550 of the 2,300 MacDonalDs at Ardnaree were armed fighting men while the rest were civilians. If this figure is accurate, it would support the view that the two-handed sword was used by the vast majority of Hebridean warriors. See J. Michael Hill, *Fire and Sword* (London, 1993), 209.

¹²² Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie, *The Historie and Cronicles of Scotland*, Vol. I, ed. A. J. Mackay (Edinburgh, 1899), 270-1. Cannan has observed that the Scottish government may have noted Huntly’s success with the weapon at Flodden and ordered ‘gud twa handit swordis’ for the defence of the realm. See Fergus Cannan, *Scottish Arms and Armour* (2009), 31.

¹²³ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 225.

¹²⁴ *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 376-7; MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 225; Hill, ‘Origins of the “Highland Charge”’, 299-300.

¹²⁵ Wiseman, ‘Chasing the Deer’, 39.

¹²⁶ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 226.

...ar lúth ar lámhach curadh
ag teacht go dula i gcaonnaig.

...for vigour, for a champion's cast
as he cometh to enter battle.¹²⁷

...saoi nach sgreadach go lámhach...

...the one is a hero who blenches not at spear-cast...¹²⁸

By the early seventeenth century, descriptions of spears recede in favour of bows and firearms, especially in vernacular poetry, perhaps reflecting a genuine shift in practice. The bow was now imbued with martial credentials that equalled the throwing spear, allowing it to be invoked as a sign of strength, skill, masculinity, and perhaps even virility.¹²⁹ Yet the spear or 'dart' may not have fallen into complete disuse. In John Elder's letter to Henry VIII in 1542/3, the 'delite and pleasure' of the Highlander included the 'thrawinge of dartis'.¹³⁰ One source for the battle of Glenlivet in 1594 claimed that MacLean of Duart's vanguard was composed of 'bowmen and swordmen, with dartes and targets' and that for fifteen minutes the 'daylight was palpably eclipsed with the continwell clowd of darts and arrows that hung ouer the place'.¹³¹ Some inconclusive references in the *Annals of the Four Masters* to the use of throwing spears or darts by Hebrideans in Ireland may in fact indicate their use of the bow. In 1534, the *Annals* record the death of Eoghan, son of Aodh Ó Néill, killed by a party of Hebrideans with 'urchor do shaighitt', which has been translated as 'a cast of a dart' but could also mean 'a shot of an arrow'.¹³² In the entry for 1586 that details the massacre of Ardnaree, it is reported that the MacDonalds cast or shot 'an cédna-saithe dia saighdibh' or 'the first shower of darts'.¹³³ Both of these entries use the Gaelic term *saighead*, which can be translated as dart or arrow, and in particular *saithe saiged* is perhaps best defined as a 'flight of arrows'.¹³⁴ Therefore, these references may

¹²⁷ *Scottish Verse*, 100-1.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54-5. See also *Ibid.*, 12-3.

¹²⁹ *Eachann Bacach*, 8-9, 20-1, 28-9, 50-1.

¹³⁰ *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, 28. Darts remained popular among the galloglass in the sixteenth century, as indicated by a report from 1543 which claimed that every soldier had three at his disposal, carried into battle by his 'gille' or 'giolla' ('lad' or 'servant'). See Harbison, 'Irish Arms', 273, 276.

¹³¹ 'Account of the Battle of Balrinnes', 264, 267.

¹³² *AFM* 5, M1534.3.

¹³³ *AFM* 5, M1586.4.

¹³⁴ Dwelly, *Faclair*, 783; *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* <dil.ie/36060> My thanks to Prof. Clancy for discussing this point with me.

not indicate continuity in the use of darts but instead the prevailing use of the bow in the sixteenth century, further emphasising the distinctiveness of Scottish Hebridean soldiers when compared to the gallowglass in Ireland. The similarity in terminology between darts and arrows may derive from their similarity in function as throwing weapons. As observed by MacGregor, continuity in the Gaelic terms *làmhach*, from ‘spearcast’ to ‘volley of gunfire’, and *urchair*, from ‘slingshot’ to ‘gunshot’, suggests that the gun was ‘adapted to perform the role’ of earlier throwing weapons, like the sling, dart, or bow.¹³⁵

As early as 1513, the permutation of the bow and the two-handed sword had been implemented with some success at the otherwise disastrous battle of Flodden:

Huntleis Hieland men with their bowis and tua handit swords wrocht sa manfullie that they defait the Inglischmen bot ony slaughter on their syde.¹³⁶

Although this combination apparently saw little use by the Gaelic Irish,¹³⁷ it remained popular and effective in Scotland, as shown at the battle of Glenlivet in 1594. In MacLean of Duart’s vanguard of 3,000 men, around 1,000 wielded bows and swords,¹³⁸ and the Hebridean mercenaries who served in Ireland in 1594/5 were described as carrying ‘bows of carved wood and sharp-pointed arrows, and long broad swords with two-peaked hafts’.¹³⁹ The enduring prevalence of this combination suggests a natural synergy had been achieved. Carrying both bow and sword provided flexibility, allowing Gaelic soldiers to adapt as the battle or skirmish developed. In March 1596, MacLean claimed that, if paid by Queen Elizabeth, he could raise an army of 2,000 men: 1,500 bowmen and 500 ‘fyremen’ [gunners]. Yet these roles were not fixed or static, and MacLean goes on to say that if ‘battle be offered’, he could ‘change some of our bowmen to use their two-handed swords the time of battle’.¹⁴⁰ A 1596 report by Dioness Campbell, the Dean of Limerick, confirms this adaptability. The warriors of the Clan Cameron are singled out for their noted expertise with these weapons:

They be verie stronge, valiant and comelie persons, well skilled in archerye and in the use of the two handed sword...¹⁴¹

¹³⁵ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 224.

¹³⁶ Pitscottie, *Historie*, Vol. I, 270-1.

¹³⁷ Harbison, ‘Irish Arms’, 283.

¹³⁸ ‘A Faithful Narrative of the Battle of Balrinnis, in the North of Scotland, 3d October, 1594’, *Scottish Poems of the Sixteenth Century*, Vol. I, ed. John Graham Dalyell (Edinburgh, 1801), 145; ‘Account of the Battle of Balrinnis’, 264.

¹³⁹ *Life of O Domhnaill*, Part One, 72-3, 94-5.

¹⁴⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 170.

¹⁴¹ *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 50; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 207.

Campbell continues, describing the Gaelic islanders as similarly adept:

...theire bowmen are verie fitt and skilfull; for feats, assaults and handy blowes, there swordmen shall serve to verie good use, for that generallie they be men of stronge bodyes.¹⁴²

There may have been some specialised troops within the ranks. In 1595, MacLean of Duart was maintaining an army of 300 'fyne' men to remain as his household guard in Duart: 100 wore coats of mail, iron helmets, and wielded two-handed swords; 100 were 'fyirmen' [gunners]; 100 were bowmen.¹⁴³ Similar division was shown in Grant of Freuchie's muster in February 1596, in which 80 of his 500 men were deemed fit for the king's service: 40 wore coats of mail, iron helmets, and wielded two-handed swords, while the other 40 wore only iron helmets and wielded bows, one-handed swords, and targes, 'according to the hiland custowme'.¹⁴⁴ This suggests demarcation and specialisation within household troops, a scenario that may be evident in 'dedicated units' of MacGregor bowmen at the battle of Glen Fruin in 1603.¹⁴⁵ An account of the battle of Glenlivet claims that the islanders in MacLean's vanguard who wielded swords and Lochaber axes were 'protected by coats of mail; but the archers had none, according to custom, for lightness'.¹⁴⁶ A core grouping of elite heavy infantry wielded swords and wore mail coats from the outset of battle, while lightly armoured archers primarily had a skirmishing and ambush role, but could switch to swords for close-quarters fighting. Some engagements were apparently conducted exclusively with the bow. For example, Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart complained that some of Argyll's men had raided his lands with 'bowis, dorlochis [quivers], [and] haberschonis'. Two of Lachlann's servants were killed.¹⁴⁷ In raids of this nature the onus was on speed, deadly accuracy, and the avoidance of close-quarters fighting.¹⁴⁸ It should be noted however, that the raiders actually wore heavy armour (haubergeons) and may still have been armed with swords as secondary weapons, perhaps slung over their backs. Not all archers were necessarily armoured, as indicated by a 1598 report that stated 100 'naked Scots with bows' were in Ireland under the command of the earl of Tyrone.¹⁴⁹ Overall, there appear to be two groups or tiers of warrior: armoured men with bows and swords,

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 52; *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁴³ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 667-8.

¹⁴⁴ *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 376-7.

¹⁴⁵ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 226.

¹⁴⁶ 'A Faithful Narrative of Balrinnis', 145.

¹⁴⁷ *RPC*, Vol. III, 94-5.

¹⁴⁸ In the raid on Glen Isla in Perthshire in 1602, the MacGregors and MacDonalds of Glengarry used bows, hagbuts, and pistols, again suggestive of a swift raid that avoided close-combat. See *RPC*, Vol. VI, 500-1.

¹⁴⁹ *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. III, 287.

and unarmoured men with bows and swords, or just bows. Use of the bow is notable across both tiers, and these groupings were presumably defined primarily by the individual's social status (i.e. his propinquity to the chief) and to a lesser extent his ability to pay for his own equipment.

Axes were used in sixteenth-century Gaelic Scotland, although the long-handled axe variant is more immediately associated with the galloglass in Ireland, and previously the Norse.¹⁵⁰ John Dymmok, Elizabeth I's lord lieutenant in Ireland, states that the galloglass were armed with 'a batle axe, or halberd, six foote longe, the blade whereof is somewhat like a shomakers knyfe, and without pyke; the stroake whereof is deadly where yt lighteth'.¹⁵¹ The signature weaponry of both soldiers – the Highland Scots' *claidheamh mòr* and the galloglasses' long-handled axe – enjoyed liberal use on either side of the Irish Sea.¹⁵² A clear point of divergence was the veneration of the sword in Scotland, yet the axe was still considered a worthy weapon for the elite.¹⁵³ The tomb of Alasdair Crotach MacLeod of Harris in St Clement's Church in Rodel features a hunting scene with Alasdair in full armour, holding a long-handled axe in one hand and a claymore in the other.¹⁵⁴ A sculpture of Ragnall, progenitor of the Clanranald, features the chief holding a long-shafted 'sparr' or 'Danish' axe.¹⁵⁵

John Mair in *A History of Greater Britain* (1521) describes the weaponry of the medieval Highlander as including a 'small halbert'.¹⁵⁶ Later, Mair claims that the Clan Chattan and Clan Cameron wielded 'halberts of great sharpness, for their iron ore is good'.¹⁵⁷ These 'halberts' probably refer to a unique Highland axe variant known as the Lochaber axe; in 1501, James IV ordered 'ane batale ax maid of Lochabir fasoun'.¹⁵⁸ Caldwell has argued that the Lochaber axe may have had a substantially longer blade or could be another term for a long-handled 'Danish' axe.¹⁵⁹ The axe was still used as late as 1594, as according to Calderwood, MacLean of Duart 'played...valientlie' with the weapon against Huntly's horsemen at the battle of Glenlivet.¹⁶⁰ This confirms that the axe

¹⁵⁰ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 170-2; Harbison, 'Irish Arms', 277-8; Simms, *From Kings*, 125.

¹⁵¹ John Dymmok, *A Treatise of Ireland*, (Dublin, 1842), 7.

¹⁵² Simms, *From Kings*, 125.

¹⁵³ In MacMhuirich's description of the arming of the last Lord of the Isles, Iain is presented with an axe of 'terrible blows'. See *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 262-3.

¹⁵⁴ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, pl. 32B.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pl. 24C.

¹⁵⁶ Mair, *A History*, 49.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 358-9.

¹⁵⁸ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, Vol. II, ed. James Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1900), 111.

¹⁵⁹ Caldwell, 'Scottish Axes and Long Shafted Weapons', 253.

¹⁶⁰ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. V, 350.

could be an elite weapon, but it had specific practical application against cavalry: axe-men on foot were capable of killing horses with ease,¹⁶¹ and the lower part of the axe-blade could be used to ‘hook’ horsemen from their mounts. The relative absence of the horse in warfare in the Highlands, certainly in comparison to Ireland, perhaps explains the apparent favour shown to the two-handed sword over the axe. According to the eleventh-century Irish prose text *Cogadh Gaídhel re Gallaibh* (‘The War of the Gael against the Foreigners’), the axe was the ideal weapon for cutting through coats of mail,¹⁶² a special function that retained relevance in the sixteenth century Highlands where this form of armour remained prevalent.

Throughout medieval Europe, the axe was depicted as a ‘particularly bloodthirsty weapon’, often wielded by demonised and barbaric people, perhaps because of its specific application against cavalry. The axe, like the crossbow, made the mounted knightly class feel vulnerable; essentially, it was a social leveller and thus maligned by the elite as a weapon for brutes.¹⁶³ These negative connotations did not prevent the use of the axe in the West Highlands and Isles even by the elite, yet they may explain why the axe was not venerated in poetry, unlike the sword.

The sword and bow, and to a lesser extent, the axe, remained the main weapons of choice for the Scottish Gael, but the ‘newer weapons’ – firearms of many types – were ‘gaining ground’ by the middle of the sixteenth century.¹⁶⁴ In the first-half of the sixteenth century, before they became more widespread, firearms were exotic weapons capable of enhancing a chief’s prestige. In 1553, Alasdair Ross of Balnagowan seems to delight in the order of ‘ane Culvering yat beis rycht fyne’ and ‘four ferynks [firkins] of fine culvering poudyr’.¹⁶⁵ An English observer noted that the Highlanders involved in *Dòmhnall Dubh*’s rebellion in 1545 had ‘few guns’.¹⁶⁶ In 1555, Aodh, the son of Phelim Ó Néill,¹⁶⁷ was ‘killed by the Scots, with the shot of a ball’.¹⁶⁸ Guns had clearly made significant inroads by the end of the century, as accounts of the battle of Glenlivet in 1594 record that in MacLean’s vanguard of 3,000 men ‘2000 wer hagbutters, the third made up of bowmen

¹⁶¹ John Barbour, *The Bruce*, ed. A.A.M. Duncan (Edinburgh, 1997), 112-3; Caldwell, ‘Having the right kit’, 164-5.

¹⁶² *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh/The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, ed. and trans. J. Henthorn Todd (London, 1867), 162-3.

¹⁶³ Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, 88-9.

¹⁶⁴ Aonghas MacCoinnich, ‘Dùn Èistean: the historical background, c. 1493 – c.1700’, in *Dùn Èistean: Excavations on a Late-Medieval Clan Stronghold*, ed. R. Barrowman, (Forthcoming). My thanks to Dr MacCoinnich for allowing me to see an early draft of this paper.

¹⁶⁵ *Old Ross-shire and Scotland*, ed. W. MacGill (Inverness, 1909), 264-5; MacCoinnich, ‘Dùn Èistean’.

¹⁶⁶ Gregory, *History*, 171.

¹⁶⁷ Henry A. Jefferies, ‘O’Neill, Brian mac Phelim, lord of Clandeboye (d. 1574)’, *ODNB*, (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁶⁸ *AFM* 5, 1555.1.

and swordmen'.¹⁶⁹ As mentioned, a single warrior could carry a bow and sword, and switch between them at will. Gunners were apparently less flexible and are rarely described as filling multiple roles on the battlefield, perhaps due to the cumbersome weight of their weapon. In this period, firearms were not uniformly superior to the bow. Clear downsides included their relative inaccuracy, slow fire-rate, and higher cost. Furthermore, their efficacy in penetrating plate armour was of limited importance in the Highlands and Isles of Scotland where lighter armour predominated.¹⁷⁰

Firearms were used in warfare with increasing regularity by the end of the sixteenth century, but the bow was never displaced entirely, and the two missile weapons could be used in tandem. At the battle of Glenlivet in 1594, Huntly's horsemen suffered grisly wounds from Argyll's army: the earl of Errol was shot in the arm by a bullet and took an arrow to the thigh.¹⁷¹ In 1601, MacDonald of Glengarry's galley was capsized by a 'salvo of musketry and arrows'.¹⁷² By the 1630s, the role of firearms in warfare had become so ingrained that they began to be extolled in contemporary poetry. The MacLean poet Eachann Bacach vividly described his clans' guns:

An dùirn laochraidh gun leòn
 Cuilbheir caol cruaidh gorm,
 Fuaim shradaidh nan òrd toirt lasain dhaibh.

Slender, hard, blued muskets in the hands of warriors
 who never suffered wounds, as the sound of the
 hammers providing the spark inflames their wrath.¹⁷³

Extensive use of handguns is noted during the 'Islay Rising' of 1615, with the besieged MacDonalds shooting at Campbell of Cawdor's men from the walls of Dunivaig Castle.¹⁷⁴ Relatively few clans appear to have had access to artillery meanwhile, and as discussed in Chapter 4 these weapons were rarely used in warfare.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ 'Account of the Battle of Balrinnis', 264; 'A Faithful Narrative of Balrinnis', 145.

¹⁷⁰ Gervase Phillips, 'Longbow and Hackbutt: Weapons Technology and Technology Transfer in Early Modern England', *Technology and Culture*, 40 (July, 1999), 578-81, 592; Rogers, 'Tactics', 210-11. Plate armour was going out of fashion elsewhere in Scotland after Flodden. See Phillips, 'In the Shadow of Flodden', 168-9.

¹⁷¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 460.

¹⁷² Gregory, *History*, 299; MacGregor, 'Warfare', 226.

¹⁷³ *Eachann Bacach*, 4-5.

¹⁷⁴ *Infra*: 214.

¹⁷⁵ See also *Infra*: 145 n.95.

Monumental sculpture provides our clearest vision of the armour worn by the militarised elite in Gaelic society. Effigies of chiefs generally depict the individual clad in a *luireach* or haubergeon/hauberk (coat of mail) or a *cotún* or aketon (a padded coat). Protective headgear was almost uniformly a bascinet (known in Gaelic variously as a *feilm*, *clogas*, or *ceannbheart* and in the Lowlands as a ‘steilbonet’ or ‘knapschal-bonnet’) worn over a mail coif or aventail (*sgaball*).¹⁷⁶ Various literary sources confirm that the image of the West Highland warrior depicted in sculpture roughly aligned with reality.¹⁷⁷ The government expected Highland armour to be distinctive from the rest of Scotland, as shown by ‘wapinschawingis’. These were held by successive Scottish monarchs and regents to review the country’s military preparedness and capability. In the 1575 ‘wapinschaw’, all of the ‘lawer rent and degre’ in Scotland were expected to wear

...brigantinis, jakkis, steilbonettis [and] slevis of plait or mailye...

In the Highlands, the requirements were different:

and in the hielandis, habirschonis, steilbonettis [and] hektonis...¹⁷⁸

This suggests that coats of mail remained in vogue in the Highlands, while in the Lowlands the brigandine or jack (defensive coats similar to aketons but reinforced with metal plates) were more popular.¹⁷⁹ This pattern is further confirmed in an intelligence assessment of the Isles c. 1595, which stated that one-third of men eligible for military service in the Isles were to ‘be cled with attounes and haberchounis, and knapshal bannets, as thair lawis beir’.¹⁸⁰ Plate armour was never a marked feature of Gaelic military equipment in Scotland, although it is depicted on some grave-slabs,¹⁸¹ as it was ill-suited to the type of warfare conducted in the Highlands and Isles, which prioritised mobility and speed over defence. In extreme situations in which extra protection was needed, soldiers may have worn

¹⁷⁶ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 23-8, pls. 8A, 8B, 8C, 8D, 17B, 20A, 20B, 20C, 20D, 20E, 22A, 22B, 24C, 25C, 30A, 32B, 34B; MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 224; Caldwell, ‘Having the right kit’, 151-4; Jim Bradbury, *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare* (London, 2004), 252, 254, 256.

¹⁷⁷ In 1553, Alasdair Ross of Balnagowan ordered, along with his culverin, a number of ‘abbersounis to be w^t slevis and byssoned festis’, i.e. haubergeons with sleeves and linen fastenings. See *Old Ross-shire*, 264.

¹⁷⁸ *RPS*, 1575/3/12.

¹⁷⁹ Bradbury, *Medieval Warfare*, 253-4, 257; Caldwell, ‘Having the right kit’, 155.

¹⁸⁰ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 439.

¹⁸¹ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 28, pls. 34A, 34C.

multiple armoured coats – according to Calderwood, MacLean of Duart wore two haubergeons and one jack at Glenlivet in 1594.¹⁸²

In summary, sixteenth-century warriors from the West Highlands and Isles were heavily outfitted infantry who wore coats of mail and bascinets, and wielded various weapons, including two-handed swords, axes, bows, javelins, and firearms. In this period at least, the combination of the two-handed sword and bow predominated. Lower down the social scale, the warriors may have been less well-armoured, perhaps wearing only padded coats (*cotún* or aketon), but they still had access to, and were proficient with, two-handed swords, bows, and axes. This two-tiered system of heavy and light infantry based on social status and the individuals' ability to afford expensive accoutrements is somewhat reminiscent of the galloglass and *cethern* (or 'kern') groupings in Gaelic Ireland.¹⁸³ The weaponry and armour used in the West Highlands and Isles was significantly different from the rest of Scotland, not because of a lack of awareness of other military options but because of practical constraints. The role played by the two-handed sword and the bow was much more pronounced, and the tandem use of these weapons may have been unique to the West Highlands and Isles. Furthermore, there was an absence of spears or pikes, a fact again explicable by the relative absence of the horse in Highland warfare.¹⁸⁴

3.6: Conclusion

The military capacity of the Highlands and Isles has been described as 'remarkable' and there is no doubt that society was significantly geared towards war.¹⁸⁵ The scale of military activity was not unbounded however and the notion that there were 35,000 Hebridean fighting men in Ireland effectively presents the Western Isles as a source of unlimited manpower. The Hebrides, and indeed the West Highland and Isles in general, simply could not support armies of that size. Depending on the clan, forces of between 500 and 3,000 men were considered 'extraordinary' and could not be maintained for more than a few months. The total amount of fighting men in the West Highlands and Isles, if they were all under one 'commandement', was probably c. 10,000 men.¹⁸⁶ The majority of these soldiers were 'householders' or 'ordinary' clansmen, and only a small proportion (around 3,000) were 'gentlemen' or *daoine uaisle*. Thus, despite some overstatements in recent years, the military capacity of the region was still clearly considerable.

¹⁸² Calderwood, *History*, Vol. V, 350.

¹⁸³ Simms, *From Kings*, 118-26. A key difference however is that the 'kern' in Ireland were landless mercenaries, whereas these lighter equipped soldiers in Scotland appear to be attached to specific clans.

¹⁸⁴ Phillips, 'In the Shadow of Flodden', 168-70.

¹⁸⁵ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 241.

¹⁸⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253-4.

Beyond the sheer numbers they could muster, the flexibility and adaptability of the Highlands and Islanders in war was probably the main reason that they were in demand as mercenaries in Ireland. Conservatism may have encouraged the slow adoption of new military technology, but the 'old' forms of warfare remained undeniably effective, and the enduring use of 'traditional' equipment, considered antiquated on the continent, cannot be explained by the 'relative isolation' of the West Highlands and Isles.¹⁸⁷ Approaches to warfare are largely shaped by the immediate environment and topography of the locality. The synergy achieved by the combination of the two-handed sword and the bow in the sixteenth century is mirrored by the inherent suitability of this weaponry in the landscape of the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland.

¹⁸⁷ Steer and Bannerman, *Monumental Sculpture*, 28-9. Phillips has shown that the English continued to use the bow well into the sixteenth century, often in tandem with firearms. See Phillips, 'Longbow and Hackbutt', 580-3, 591-3.

Chapter 4: Conduct of Warfare

Warfare in the Highlands has long been viewed as ‘hideously brutal and destructive’ on a scale that far outstripped the norms of contemporary Scottish society, even in the allegedly ‘wild country’ of the Borders.¹ Ancient portrayals of Highland savagery may endure in modern historiography through descriptions of ‘wild’ Highland armies behaving akin to a ‘mob’ or a ‘rabble’.² Although the pivotal role played by the Highland soldier during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms has slowly been acknowledged,³ studies of earlier periods are quick to fall back on overused stereotypes. Recent revisionism by MacGregor, partly in reaction to these stereotypes, presented a more nuanced view of Highland warfare, although its constrained length inhibited thorough consideration of specific issues, such as the realities of battles or sieges. Moreover, while MacGregor’s claim that there was a ‘presumption against indiscriminate slaughter’ is more representative than previous views,⁴ it nevertheless risks eliding the occasionally brutal nature of warfare. Overall, it is difficult to make generalisations about the conduct of warfare in the late medieval and early modern West Highlands and Isles. This chapter will analyse the conduct of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles through assessment of a series of themes: raids, battles and skirmishes, massacres, castles and sieges, and naval warfare. An underappreciated aspect of Highland warfare, namely the participation of Highlanders and Islanders in royal armies, will also be discussed, following Boardman’s work on this theme up to 1513.⁵

4.1: Raids

The most common form of Gaelic warfare during this period was the *creach*, the cattle raid.⁶ Cattle represented the main source of wealth in the Highlands and Isles, and the primary goal of these ‘hit-and-run’ raids was the ‘positive capture of resources’.⁷ This economic motive may have mitigated bloodshed,⁸ and MacGregor has argued that the raids were generally ‘tit-for-tat’, a careful choreography that allowed for the ‘preservation of life’.⁹ Elements of ritual may have been present in these raids as outlined by Martin

¹ Smout, *History*, 98; Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 7, 31-2.

² Cameron, *James V*, 335; Phillips, *Anglo-Scot Wars*, 162-3; Stuart Reid, *The Campaigns of Montrose* (Edinburgh, 1990), 58, 90-1.

³ Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*.

⁴ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 221.

⁵ Boardman, ‘Highland Scots’, 231-53.

⁶ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 216.

⁷ *Campbell Letters*, 45.

⁸ Dodgshon, *Chiefs to Landlords*, 87-8; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 136-40; *Campbell Letters*, 44; MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 216.

⁹ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 221.

Martin,¹⁰ with a widely held understanding that the incursion would be reciprocated to redeem the honour of the clan. Cattle raids required tight discipline to prevent bloodshed, a generally undesirable outcome for both clans as it demanded retaliation and raised the spectre of extended bloodfeud. Although there was little tactically innovative about the cattle raids, they were generally conducted with a considerable degree of restraint. Some of the more destructive raids however, even if they did not directly target clan members, may have caused death through starvation and poverty.

The raiding culture of the Highlands and Isles was not unique. Raiding was a ubiquitous form of warfare in medieval Europe and beyond,¹¹ and falls under the umbrella of the 'small war'.¹² Closer to home, cross-border raiding between Scotland and England was endemic until the end of the sixteenth century,¹³ and this approach to warfare strongly resembles Ireland before and after the Tudor period. Although the nature of war in Ireland adopted newfound intensity and scale in the sixteenth century, there was congruence with the Scottish experience in terms of cattle raiding, as Simms has observed that the killing of the enemy was 'not the object...but only an incidental necessity'.¹⁴

The plunder taken during raids was variable, possibly fluctuating depending on the season in which the raid was conducted. Some raids were extremely successful, dramatically enriching the raider while impoverishing the aggrieved. A raid on the Grants' Urquhart castle in the summer of 1546 saw the MacDonalDs of Glengarry and the Clan Cameron steal c. 100 cows, 100 calves, 40 young cows, 10 bullock, 140 ewes, 100 lambs, 8 horses, 4 mares, and 4 foals. Gaining entry to the castle itself, they stole everything that was not tied down, including the 'kyst' [chest] which held £300, kitchen utensils, and even 'tuelf feddir beddis'.¹⁵ The Clan Gregor perhaps made the most extraordinary gains in cattle rustling in the early seventeenth century. One raid on Glen Isla in August 1602 saw the MacGregors, the MacDonalDs of Glengarry, and the Clan Chattan carry off 2,700 cattle and 100 horses belonging to the Robertsons of Straloch and other families.¹⁶ Another MacGregor raid in December 1602 saw the theft of 846 ewes, 578 cows, 527 goats, 16

¹⁰ Martin, *Description*, 101-2; Supra: 46.

¹¹ Philippe Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford, 1984), 228; Gareth Williams, 'Raiding and Warfare', *The Viking World*, eds Stefan Brink & Neil Price (London, 2012), 193-203.

¹² Simon Pepper, 'Aspects of operational art: communications, cannon, and small war', *European Warfare, 1350-1750*, 195-6.

¹³ Groundwater, *Scottish Middle March*, 33, 128, 134-7.

¹⁴ Katharine Simms, 'Warfare in the Medieval Gaelic Lordships', *The Irish Sword*, 12 (1975-6), 104; Simms, *From Kings*, 125-6.

¹⁵ Fraser, *Chiefs of Grant*, Vol. I, 112-3; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 138.

¹⁶ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 500-1.

mares, and 2 horses from the Colquhouns.¹⁷ By way of contrast, a more modest spoil of 155 cattle was taken by the Clan Cameron in a raid against Ferguson of Derculich in 1602.¹⁸

Cattle raids mainly took place in the summer months, yet some were conducted in the winter. In November 1602, Campbell of Auchinbreck plundered the lands of Stewart of Ardmaleish, the sheriff of Bute.¹⁹ On 17 December 1602, the MacGregors raided the Colquhoun lands of Glen Finlas, looting houses and stealing hundreds of cattle, sheep, and other livestock.²⁰ Raids of this nature were a potential death sentence for the victims. When the harvest was collected in September and October, stockpiles of grain and livestock had to last through the long winter months, and destruction or theft of these supplies made starvation a very real possibility. Raids in the winter may have represented a deliberate escalation of warfare, aimed at causing starvation, yet equally, the attackers could have been motivated by desperation due to the scarcity of their own supplies. Even boredom and idleness among professional warriors during the long winter months may have initiated some of these incursions.

In the maritime world of the West Highlands and Isles, the sea was far from an impassable barrier, and although clans often campaigned as mercenaries across the Irish Sea, the coast of Ireland was also targeted by more predatory incursions. The MacNeills of Barra were particularly infamous for their piratical activities in this period,²¹ especially for their raids on the coast of Connacht in Ireland.²² In 1589, it was reported to the English Privy Council that:

Four hundred Scots of the sept of the Barrones invaded Irris [Erris in Country Mayo], killed 600 cows, freighting their gallies with the spoil, and 500 cows besides they carried to an island and there killed them and took away the hides and tallow. The Burkes gathered forces to expel the Scots, and some blood was shed on both sides.²³

¹⁷ GCA: T-CL, Bundle XCVI, ff. 9 (original); NRS: GD50/187 [Box II: 1600-10, Bundle: 1603-4] (transcript). *Infra*: 165.

¹⁸ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 495.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 517-8.

²⁰ GCA: T-CL, Bundle XCVI, ff. 9 (original); NRS: GD50/187 [Box II: 1600-10, Bundle 1603-4] (transcript).

²¹ In 1595/6, the MacNeill chief was credited by the Dean of Limerick as the 'best seafaringe waryer in the ilands'. See *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 49.

²² *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 49; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 206; Denis Rixson, *The West Highland Galley* (Edinburgh, 1998), 34-6. An anonymous poem, possibly addressed to Aonghas Mór MacDonal of Islay (d. 1296), provides a vivid description of sea raids on the coast of Ireland. See *Duanaire na Sracaire*, 80-91.

²³ *CSPI*, Vol. IV, 242.

This raid, apparently conducted by the MacNeills of Barra ('Barrones'), answers a lingering question posed by Morgan's review of *The World of the Galloglass*, namely whether galleys were able to 'carry away live cattle or just their hides'.²⁴ Clearly, they could do both. Depending on their size, *bírlinnean* or galleys could carry anywhere between 36 and 72 men and were still seaworthy if undermanned, as indicated by the MacLeods of Lewis' raid on the merchant ship in 1598, performed by two ships of 20 men.²⁵ Thus the 400 strong MacNeill force could have sailed in a fleet of anywhere between 5 and 20 vessels, but it was probably closer to the latter, as undermanned ships left more room for cattle and other spoils. Seaborne cattle raids within the Hebrides were probably quite common. In 1601, the MacLeods of Harris raided North Uist, carrying off livestock that probably would have been transported (dead or alive) via galleys had they not been ambushed by a small MacDonald force before reaching the coast.²⁶

Although enrichment was the primary objective of raids, killings were not uncommon when the invaded party mounted a physical resistance to the incursion. As already shown, in 1589 the MacNeills of Barra were attacked by the Burkes after a raid with 'some' losses on both sides.²⁷ Additionally, following the cattle raid on Glen Isla in August 1602 by the MacGregors, the MacDonalds of Glengarry, and the Clan Chattan, the Robertsons of Straloch convened with other aggrieved families to track down the raiders and recover their stolen property. Soon, they were ambushed by the cattle raiders: 15 or 16 'speciall gentilmen' from Glen Isla were killed, and 'a grite nowmer' of others were 'woundit to the deid'. The raiders, presumably having taken casualties, were anxious to escape, but knew they could not 'guidlie get the saidis guidis caryit away with thame' as they had stolen an unmanageable number (over 2,000) of cattle. In a cynical move, the raiders killed the 'maist part' of the stolen animals, unburdening themselves for an escape, while denying both sides the valuable property. Although the hides and tallow of the cattle could still be recovered, this was little consolation for the Robertsons who declared the slaughter 'to the grite hurte and prejudice of the commoun wele'.²⁸ Outright rustling was the most common form of *creach*, but some cattle raids involved the maiming or killing of livestock, an act aimed at diminishing the wealth of rivals and perhaps coinciding with general attacks on property.²⁹ Indeed, some raids seem more reminiscent of scorched-earth

²⁴ Hiram Morgan, 'Review of *The World of the Galloglass*, ed. Seán Duffy', *SHR*, 89 (April, 2010), 103.

²⁵ *Supra*: 84.

²⁶ *Infra*: 186-87.

²⁷ *CSPI*, Vol. IV, 242.

²⁸ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 500-1.

²⁹ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 336, Vol. III, 114, 251.

tactics or the *chevauchées* conducted during the Hundred Years War, which aimed to weaken the enemy by pillaging and destroying his land.³⁰ During the conquest of Ireland, the English and Irish alike attempted to starve their opponent into submission.³¹ Comparably severe tactics were seemingly employed by both participants in the feud between the MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacLeods of Harris in 1601. These raids outstripped the *creach* in severity, and their intention was presumably to force a submission or provoke a battle, which in this case did eventually occur, as shown in Chapter 6. On rare occasions, raids directly targeted tenantry. In 1588, a raid on the Small Isles by MacLean of Duart was allegedly indiscriminate, according to a government report:

...[MacLean] accompanied with a grite nowmer of thevis, brokin men, and sornaris of Clannis...come, bodin in feir of weir, to his Majesteis propir ilis of Canna Rum, Eg, and the Ile of Elennole [Muck?], and...thay tressonable rased fyre, and in maist barbarous, shamefull and cruell maner, brynt the same Illis, with the haill men, wemen and childrene being thairintill, not spairing the pupillis and infantis...³²

A raid of this nature could have been intended to demoralise and terrorise the local populace until the lordship of the aggressor was accepted.³³

4.2: Battles and Skirmishes

Pitched or ‘set piece’ battles were relatively infrequent in the West Highlands and Isles between 1544 and 1615. As argued by MacGregor, there was a ‘very powerful predisposition against large-scale and head-on confrontation’.³⁴ Due to the generally self-contained nature of a clan’s military capacity (in contrast to the reliance on mercenaries in Ireland), the carnage of battle came with a heavy human cost that struck directly at the heart of the clan’s strength, with its limited pool of elite warriors. A vivid example of the risks of full-scale battle was the near annihilation of the Clan Fraser at *Blàr nan Lèine* in 1544.³⁵ Clans weakened by battle became prime targets for further incursions by opportunistic rivals. As a result of these concerns, few clans engaged in more than one

³⁰ Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, 215, 223-5.

³¹ Edwards, ‘Escalation of violence’, 45, 52, 55, 61-2.

³² *RPC*, Vol. IV, 341-2.

³³ Simms, *From Kings*, 125-6.

³⁴ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 221. In an Irish context, Edwards has argued that ‘limited combat’ such as raiding or ambushing ‘involved both minimum risk of military casualties and a higher probability of success; in short, it was the most effective way to fight’. See Edwards, ‘Escalation of violence’, 44.

³⁵ *Infra*: 137-41.

major battle in Scotland between 1544 and 1615, as they were loath to repeatedly risk the lives of their fighting elite in large-scale combat.³⁶

The Dean of Limerick's report in 1596, which recommended the Hebridean clans for service against Tyrone in Ulster, provides a vision of the warfare waged by the Highlanders and Islanders:

...the hope of the ennemy in the streingthe of their parts may be taken away by the islanders service in this, that the army marchinge throwe the same, their light men may be guided by good guydes throughe bogges and woods to assaulte them behind their backs with swords and arrowes, so as the army may securelie goe throwe. Moreover, they be lustie curragious and forward in their manner of fight and weapon, if they have a good leader...³⁷

Mobile skirmishing is clearly singled out as the core strength of the islanders, who were perhaps best employed to harass or ambush larger armies. Nevertheless, the islanders were not averse to close-quarters combat for 'feats, assaults, and handy blowes'.³⁸ This chimes with MacLean of Duart's claim that his men could switch from bow to sword when necessary.³⁹ The main skillsets of the islanders were particularly desirable in Ireland as it gelled with the guerrilla warfare employed by Tyrone and the other Irish chiefs.⁴⁰

Their flexibility also proved useful in other theatres of war. In July 1548, as part of the 'Rough Wooing', a coalition of Scottish and French troops besieged Haddington in Lothian which had been occupied by the English. Jean de Beaugué, a French soldier who served with the Scottish army at the time, was impressed by the Highlanders' performance:

There was not one of them, who gave not convincing Proofs, that they stood in no Awe of the English, they beat off their advanc'd Guards in a Minute, with a Volley of Arrows and then with Sword in Hand advanc'd upon 5 or 600 that were posted between the Port and the Barriers...⁴¹

³⁶ Macinnes, *Clanship*, 30-1.

³⁷ *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 49; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 208. Dawson noted the use of 'lychtmen' by Argyll during the Chaseabout Raid, whom she assumed were light horsemen, but this source clearly indicates that they were scouts on foot. See *Campbell Letters*, 45, 109.

³⁸ *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 49; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 208.

³⁹ *Supra*: 98.

⁴⁰ Ciaran Brady, 'The captains' games', 137; Simms, *From Kings*, 125-6. MacLean of Duart describes his bowmen as 'very meet for that country'. Hill has unconvincingly argued that guerrilla warfare was 'of little use against the Normans'. See *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 170; J. Michael Hill, 'Gaelic Warfare 1453-1815', *European Warfare, 1453-1815*, ed. Jeremy Black (London, 1999), 205.

⁴¹ *The History of the Campagnes, 1548 and 1549*, 19.

With bow and sword in perfect synchronicity, the Highland troops harassed and drove off the advancing English line that aimed to silence the Scottish cannons. Stevenson has argued that the ‘Highland charge’ was a tactical innovation by Alasdair MacColla in the 1640s, in which the Highlander soldiers advanced within musket range of the enemy ranks, fired one volley, and then cast aside their muskets to charge the enemy with their swords and targes.⁴² De Beaugué’s description provides further persuasive evidence that the ‘Highland charge’ had ‘earlier origins’, as already argued by Caldwell and MacGregor.⁴³ The ranged weaponry may have changed from bow to musket by the 1640s, but the underlying tactics remained essentially identical.

Hill, following Hayes-McCoy,⁴⁴ has argued that ‘Gaelic’ armies only adopted guerrilla and skirmish tactics when faced against the militarily superior English, and ‘when fighting among themselves, Gaelic generals...slugged it out using heavy infantry armed with blade weapons’.⁴⁵ The focus of Hill and Hayes-McCoy on Ireland in the late sixteenth century may explain the divergence found in Highlands and Isles of Scotland where small-scale skirmishing was the main component of warfare. Ambushes were especially prevalent in warfare between clans in the Highlands, indicating an avoidance of ‘head-on’ pitched battles. Notable examples include the waylaying of the Frasers by the Clanranald at Laggan in 1544,⁴⁶ and Ailean Cameron of Lochiel’s ambush of his own kin in 1614.⁴⁷ In the former example, the ambush by the Clanranald was successful, but the Frasers managed to marshall a stout defence.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Hill’s comment that armies ‘slugged it out’ does evoke the intensity and vigour of some pitched battles fought in Scotland, many of which lasted for several hours before a victor emerged. At *Blàr nan Lèine* in 1544 for example, the fighting continued until night fell,⁴⁹ at *Blàr Traigh Ghruinneart* in 1598 the battle was ‘foughten a long tyme on either syd’,⁵⁰ and at *Blàr Coire na Creiche* in 1601, the MacLeods of Harris fought the MacDonalds of Sleat ‘all the day long’.⁵¹

Before battle was given, Highland troops may have used music and poetry to boost morale and prepare for combat. A MacGregor song possibly related to the battle of Glen

⁴² Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 82-4.

⁴³ Caldwell, ‘Having the right kit’, 167; MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 223-4.

⁴⁴ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Irish Battles* (Harlow, 1969), 75.

⁴⁵ Hill, ‘Shane O’Neill’s Campaign’, 137.

⁴⁶ *Infra*: 137-41.

⁴⁷ *Infra*: 202-4.

⁴⁸ In addition, both the battle of Carinish in 1601 and the battle of Glen Fruin in 1603 involved an ambush. *Infra*: 186-87, 165-70.

⁴⁹ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110.

⁵⁰ *History of the Feuds*, 238; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 238,

⁵¹ *History of the Feuds*, 242-3; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 245.

Fruin in 1603 describes a feast which had ‘pìob ga spreigeadh/pipes inciting’ the MacGregor leader and his followers.⁵² Jean de Beaugué claims that a contingent of the earl of Argyll’s Highlanders, ‘les Escossois sauvages’, were ‘provocquoyent aux armes par les sons de leurs cornemeuses’ (‘provoked to arms by the sound of their bagpipes’) when battle with the English appeared imminent at Musselburgh.⁵³ Similarly, poets used the *brosnachadh catha* (incitement to battle) to encourage chiefs and their warriors to battle.⁵⁴

As already observed in Chapter 2, mediation between leaders could take place before fighting began, as shown at *Blàr Tràigh Ghruinneart* in 1598, and these pre-battle negotiations can be seen as a last attempt to prevent bloodshed. With the armies assembled and ready for battle, the likelihood of a peaceful settlement was slim at such a late stage, and instead these negotiations may have been a pretence designed to fail, a pre-battle ritual demonstrating to both sides that the dispute could now only be settled by force of arms. Moreover, an offer of talks may simply have been the proper and polite way to initiate combat, as it provided a chance, however unlikely, for bloodless resolution. When the terms of the negotiations were patently unworkable, as they were in 1598 between the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the MacLeans of Duart, they may even have provoked one side to attack.

Highland soldiers have often been portrayed as ‘wild’ and unruly, a view that reached a nadir with Stuart Reid commenting that Highland armies, even in the seventeenth century, were a ‘half-armed, undisciplined mob’.⁵⁵ In contrast, a high premium was placed upon the rigorous discipline of the soldiery in bardic poetry, even when the chief was extolled for his personal bravery. This is shown in a poem to Campbell in Lawers from *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* in which his army is unified as a ‘company’, a ‘host’, a ‘valorous band’, and a ‘troop that scatters not’.⁵⁶ Furthermore, heraldic banners may have been unfurled in battle to maintain discipline and increase morale. Heraldry was a common facet of medieval warfare in Europe, with heraldic designs emblazoned on banners, armour, or shields to allow allies and enemies to be easily distinguished, and it certainly existed in the West Highlands and Isles.⁵⁷ The poem to Campbell of Lawers references banners in relation to Lawers’ mooted participation in the battle of Flodden in

⁵² *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 72-3.

⁵³ de Beaugué, *Histoire*, 62; *History of the Campaigns*, 55.

⁵⁴ Watson, *Scottish Verse*, 290, 158-65; Martin, *Description*, 104-5; Bannerman, ‘Lordship of the Isles’, 233.

⁵⁵ Reid, *Montrose*, 58, 90-1.

⁵⁶ *Scottish Verse*, 106-121.

⁵⁷ Michael Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages* (London, 1996), 223; Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, 11-4; Alastair Campbell of Airds, ‘West Highland Heraldry’, *Lordship of the Isles*, 200-10.

1513, or a hypothetical revenge attack on the English.⁵⁸ Likewise, a poem composed for Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig (d. 1626) encourages him to ‘display [his] banner as a satin beast’.⁵⁹ Poetry written for MacLean chiefs in the first half of the seventeenth century repeatedly references the use of banners, which may indicate continuing use at this time.⁶⁰ These banners are specifically mentioned as helping to maintain unit cohesion:

Bhiodh fir Mhuile mud’ bhrataich,
’S ann mud’ ghualainn gum faight’ iad;
Bu nì duilich am fasdadh ’s do leòn.

The men of Mull would be around your banner, they
would be found at your shoulder: it would be a
difficult thing to seize them and wound you.⁶¹

Other than examples from poetry, Hugh MacDonald claims that MacLean of Ardgour ‘displayed his colours in his galley’ at the battle of Bloody Bay c. 1481,⁶² and the Fraser history states that the Clanranald displayed seven banners at *Blàr nan Lèine* in 1544.⁶³ As this latter engagement was an ambush that progressed into a full-scale battle, it seems surprising that they would announce their arrival in such a way, but they may have unfurled their banners when the Frasers had already been trapped.

‘Gaelic’ warfare has been characterised as possessing an ‘emphasis on the attack’, epitomised by the ‘Highland charge’.⁶⁴ The approach to battle in the Highlands and Isles defies such simple generalisations as each engagement and each commander was different. Not all battles were won by an initial offensive charge, and in fact, a considerable number of battles involved defensive strategies. For example, according to one account of *Blàr Traigh Ghruinneart* in 1598,⁶⁵ Sir Seumas MacDonald feigned a retreat to outmanoeuvre his opponent, MacLean of Duart:

⁵⁸ *Scottish Verse*, 106-7, 112-3. Banners were probably a necessity in a royal army to help the identification of different companies. See David Caldwell, ‘The Battle of Pinkie’, *Scotland and War*, 64 (fig. 2), 65 (fig. 3), 74.

⁵⁹ Osborn Bergin, ‘Address to Sémas Mac Aonghais’, *SGS*, 4 (1934-5), 138-9.

⁶⁰ *Eachan Bacach*, 2-3, 8-9, 16-7, 28-9, 30-1, 38-9.

⁶¹ *Eachann Bacach*, 6-7. For more references to banners, see *Ibid.*, 8-9, 16-7, 28-9, 30-1, 38-9.

⁶² *HP*, Vol. I, 49.

⁶³ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 135.

⁶⁴ Jeremy Black, ‘Introduction’, *European Warfare*, 18; Hill, ‘Gaelic Warfare’, 201-3; MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 223.

⁶⁵ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 237-8; *Chronicles of Frasers*, 232-3

...in the beginning, caused his vanguard make a compass in fashion of a retreat, thereby to get the sun at his back, and the advantage of a hill which was hard by. In end, Sir James having repulsed the enemies vanguard, and forcing their main battle, Maclean was slain courageously fighting...⁶⁶

Seumas baited his enemy to attack his elevated position and once MacLean's presumably tired vanguard was 'repulsed', only then did he launch a downhill charge on the 'main battle'. He clearly employed a premeditated strategy to exploit the surrounding terrain and mitigate his numerical disadvantage. This kind of manoeuvring in the face of the enemy again emphasises the importance of discipline and strong leadership in Highland armies. At other battles, the numerically inferior force typically adopted a defensive position on high ground, as shown during the MacDonald/MacLeod feud in 1601, firstly at Carinish and then at the climactic *Blàr Coire na Creiche*.⁶⁷ Even with a numerical advantage, a defensive strategy could be used, as shown at Glenlivet in 1594, where Argyll's army repulsed waves of cavalry charges by Huntly. By fighting from the high ground, an army could force an overconfident enemy to risk a potentially costly charge uphill. Although Huntly's cavalry eventually punched through Argyll's lines at Glenlivet, his men initially took heavy casualties from withering volleys of arrows and musket balls as they charged up the hilltop.

The early phases of battle could be carefully orchestrated, but the onset of close combat probably ushered generalised chaos. As the battle wore on and formations gradually disintegrated, identification of friend from foe must have become increasingly difficult.⁶⁸ Verbal communication through shouted commands and rallying cries was presumably used to keep combatants organised during battle. A natural rally point would have been the clan chief himself and his retinue. Leaders may have wielded or worn ornamented equipment to be distinguished from the rank and file,⁶⁹ thus operating as a

⁶⁶ *History of the Feuds*, 65-6. Rather than an evenly matched battle, MacLean may have been ambushed by Sir Seumas. In August 1598, Lachlann's son Eachann claimed that his father had been killed 'under tryst' and later in 1608, Sir Seumas' various crimes included the 'tressonabill murthour of umquhill Sir Lauchlane M'Callane of Dowart, his uncle, committit under traist and creidit'. See *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 259; *RPC*, Vol. VIII, 768.

⁶⁷ *Infra*: 187-90.

⁶⁸ Cases of mistaken identity did occur in warfare. See *Campbell Letters*, 47, 174-8, 181-2.

⁶⁹ A purportedly authentic picture of Dòmhnall Gorm Òg MacDonald of Sleat (d. 1646) depicts him in all his finery, including intricate designs on his shirt, and engravings on his metal helmet (replete with hanging horse hair decoration). However, the provenance of this picture relies considerably on the word of the dubious Sobieski Stuarts, so it should be treated with caution. See *Clan Donald*, Vol. III, 54 (opposite); Angus Matheson, 'Poems from a Manuscript of Cathal Mac Muireadhaigh', *Éigse*, 11 (1964-5), 11; *Eachann Bacach*, 200-1, n. 396.

personified banner that clansmen could look to for organisation and inspiration during the fighting.⁷⁰ Phillips has asserted that Highland warfare was characterised by a ‘high degree of weapon skill’ rather than ‘unit cohesion’.⁷¹ Based on accounts of the best documented battle of the period, Glenlivet in 1594, this appears to be a relatively accurate description of the ensuing *mêlée*, although this conflict may be a relatively chaotic and atypical benchmark.⁷² It was reported that many of the MacLeans on Argyll’s side, in emulation of the kind of suicidal obstinacy made famous by the galloglass in Ireland,⁷³ fought to the last man even when hope for victory was lost:

They stood singly, and rather suffered themselves to be killed, than ask quarter: nay, we saw many, individually surrounded by horse, refuse to yield, and meet death with an undaunted countenance.⁷⁴

By this point in the battle, a second charge by Huntly’s horsemen had succeeded in disrupting Argyll’s formations, and the frontlines were in disarray.⁷⁵ The above source strongly implies that individual MacLean warriors engaged in single combat with Huntly’s horsemen.⁷⁶ This may indicate a genuine desire, especially among the chiefs and clan elite, to conduct themselves bravely even in the face of certain defeat. The MacLean chief, Lachlann Mòr, also ‘rushed into the thickest of his enemies’ to fight alongside his men.⁷⁷ Calderwood notes:

Macklaine hath played one of the most valiant men that ever Heeland man played. For in the coming to of Huntlie’s stale oast, after the first course was past, he having a jacke upon him, two habergiouns, with a murrioun [morrioun], and a Danish axe, he perceiving Huntlie’s standard, played so valientlie with the axe, that

⁷⁰ MacLean poetry from the early seventeenth century repeatedly mentions that the chief was instantly recognisable on the battlefield, with one poet stating that he could ‘pick [him] out on the green’. See *Eachann Bacach*, 26-7.

⁷¹ Phillips, ‘In the Shadow of Flodden’, 181.

⁷² Huntly’s use of horsemen and artillery was very different to the infantry-based combat seen in the West Highlands and Isles.

⁷³ At the Battle of Knockdoe in 1504, it was reported that out of ‘nine battalions of gallowglasses in compact array of battle, there escaped...but one thin battalion alone’. Richard Stanihurst claimed that galloglass swore an oath never to turn their backs to the enemy. See *The Annals of Ulster*, 1504.11; *Great Deeds in Ireland*, eds John Barry & Hiram Morgan (Cork, 2013), 122-3.

⁷⁴ ‘A Faithful Narrative of Balrinnis’, 148.

⁷⁵ *Historie of King James*, 341; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 460; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. V, 350; *History of the feuds*, 52; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 227-8; ‘Account of the Battle of Balrinnes’, 268.

⁷⁶ Maclean-Bristol has puzzlingly suggested that MacLean of Duart commanded a cohort of pikemen at Glenlivet, but the two-handed sword and long-handled axe would have been fairly effective counters to cavalry, and MacLean shows unfamiliarity with the weapon when in 1595 he asked Queen Elizabeth to supply pikemen led by their own ‘commandaris’. See Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 189; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 170.

⁷⁷ ‘A Faithful Narrative of Balrinnis’, 148.

he slue foure or five, untill the tyme he came to Huntlie's standard, and sticked the horse whereupon the bearer raid, and nixt cutted himself in two at the waste, and brought the standard away. This the enemeis confesse.⁷⁸

As the warrior chief was so venerated by clan society, the presence of Lachlann Mòr would have compelled his followers to stand their ground, and his immediate retinue may well have regarded it as a matter of honour to remain on the field to protect their chief, since he 'embodied the military worth of his kindred'.⁷⁹ The importance of individual leaders is shown elsewhere at Glenlivet when a notable warrior, probably the brother of MacNeill of Barra, was killed by cannonfire in the opening moments, causing many to flee.⁸⁰ One source claimed the islanders' reaction was akin to 'herds of wild beasts':

...they tooke his death as a thing ominous (for to this kynd of superstition the Hielanders generally are of all men most addicted), and were seen thereupon to stagger and reel to and fro in great disorder.⁸¹

While this statement is loaded with prejudice, it may reflect the shocked reaction of clansmen witnessing the sudden death of their leader, who in this instance was credited as 'one of the most valiant men of that party'.⁸² The capture or death of a chief in battle generally signalled defeat and several engagements appear to have climaxed with the death of the warleader or chief (MacDonald of Sleat at Eilean Donan c. 1540;⁸³ MacLean in 1598;⁸⁴ MacDonald of Glengarry's son in 1602/3) or his capture (MacLeod of Harris' brother in 1601).⁸⁵ According to Gregory, when Alasdair MacGorrie was surprised and killed by the MacKenzies, the 'loss so disheartened the MacDonalds [of Glengarry] that they returned home without performing any action of consequence'.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. V, 350. MacLean, heavily armoured with two haubergeons and fending off Huntly's horsemen with his two-handed 'Danish' axe, is extremely reminiscent of a traditional galloglass. According to Simms, the function of the galloglass was as a rear-guard, 'to provide a defensive shelter for the retreating nobility', and MacLean performs essentially the same role here by delaying Huntly's horsemen and allowing Argyll to escape. See Simms, 'Gaelic Warfare', 112.

⁷⁹ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 221. Reckless bravery of MacLean adherents was evidenced much later at the battle of Inverkeithing in 1651, in which eight of MacLean of Duart's foster brothers are said to have died in an attempt to save him. See Macinnes, *Clanship*, 14.

⁸⁰ *History of the Feuds*, 51; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 459; *Historie of King James*, 340. The killed soldier is recorded as 'Macneill-warray, an islander' in surviving sources, but it is unlikely that this refers to the MacNeill chief Ruaraidh an Tartair ('the Turbulent'), who was apparently still active as late as 1622. Others have suggested it was his brother. See Campbell of Airds, *Clan Campbell*, Vol. II, 113-4.

⁸¹ 'Account of the Battle of Balrinnes', 265-6

⁸² *History of the feuds*, 51. Their flight may also be explained by the use of artillery, as discussed below.

⁸³ *HP*, Vol. I, 72 n.1, 102, 215; Gregory, *History*, 145-6.

⁸⁴ As his opponent Sir Seumas was badly wounded in the fighting, it seems likely that at least some of this battle was conducted while the army leaders were incapacitated. See *History of the feuds*, 66.

⁸⁵ *Infra*: 187-90.

⁸⁶ Gregory, *History*, 300.

The siege of Haddington in 1548 provides another interesting anecdotal example of a Highland soldier's strong desire to win renown on the battlefield. According to Jean de Beaugué, one Highlander from Argyll's contingent charged a group of English soldiers in combat with his French allies

...and with incredible Celerity Seizing one of them, in spite of Opposition trus'd him upon his Back, and in this Plight brought him to our Camp; where we observ'd that the Enrag'd Captive had Bit his Shoulder after so Butcherly a manner, that he had almost Died of the Wound.⁸⁷

For this feat of personal bravery, the French commander André de Montalembert (Seigneur d'Essé) rewarded him with a coat of mail and 20 crowns, which the unknown Highlander 'receiv'd with all imaginable Demonstrations of Gratitude'.⁸⁸ Overall, there was a strong emphasis placed on discipline in Highland armies, but there was scope, where appropriate, for impetuous action by the individual.

As battles continued and casualties climbed, morale would falter, and usually one side would flee the field. This did not signal the end of the fighting, but instead initiated another phase of combat: the rout (*ruaig*) and pursuit (*tòir*).⁸⁹ Poetry celebrates the pursuit because it represented victory,⁹⁰ but it may have been when the most brutal violence occurred. At the battle of Langside in 1568 during the Marian Civil War, the MacFarlanes, fighting on the side of Regent Moray against Queen Mary, 'made great slaughter, thought not the least to achieve victory',⁹¹ and some historians have, probably justifiably, identified the MacFarlanes with the infantrymen that pursued Mary's retreating forces, until Moray called them off.⁹² In 1604, a skirmish at 'Bintoich' between 60 MacGregors and 200 Campbells and their allies apparently ended with fairly minimal casualties: two dead MacGregors and seven dead Campbells.⁹³ When the MacGregors retreated however, they were pursued by the Campbells and around 20 MacGregors were run down and killed.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ *History of the Campaignes*, 20-1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 223.

⁹⁰ *Scottish Verse*, 40-1; *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 224-5.

⁹¹ *CSPS*, Vol. II, 407.

⁹² Patrick Fraser Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol. VII (Edinburgh, 1845), 180; *CSPS*, Vol. II, 406; James Melville, *Memoirs of His Own Life* (Edinburgh, 1827), 202.

⁹³ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 113-4; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 247.

⁹⁴ *Taymouth Bk*, 39; *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 112-4.

These killings were probably of the ‘hot-blooded’ variety, regarded by contemporaries as excusable, expected, or even praiseworthy.⁹⁵

4.3: Massacres

Other post-battle incidents were of a different order and involved the cold-blooded killing of defenceless or disarmed prisoners. Marion Campbell’s song for her husband MacGregor of Glenstrae apparently describes the skirmish at Killiecrankie on 7 December 1562 in which eight Campbells were killed by a MacGregor raiding party. According to Marion, the MacGregors showed little mercy to the defeated Campbells:

... Agus ògan deas innealt’
Dhan gheàrr thu ’mhuineal mu ’chòtan.

Gum meal thu ’n cuid aodaich...

...and many an elegant, fashionable youth
Whose throat you cut along the line of his coat.

May you have the profit of their garments...⁹⁶

This skirmish may have evolved into a small-scale massacre as the Campbells whose throats were cut were probably wounded or in captivity, and therefore defenceless.⁹⁷ Ronald Black has suggested that the line ‘Dhan gheàrr thu ’mhuineal mu ’chòtan’ implies that the ‘throat was targeted in order to avoid spoiling the coat’.⁹⁸ At this skirmish, the Campbells wore silk shirts, coats, and boots – all valuable goods that could be traded and sold by the fugitive MacGregors.⁹⁹ Similar tactics were probably used to avoid puncturing coats of mail or aketons, and stripping the corpses of soldiers killed in battle would have been an immediate form of plunder for a victor.¹⁰⁰ Captured soldiers too could have their

⁹⁵ Later poetry by Iain Lom encouraged the Highlanders before the battle of Killiecrankie in 1689 to be ‘vindictive in the battle rout’. See *Orain Iain Luim*, 186-7, 307-9.

⁹⁶ MacGregor, ‘The Lament’, 140-1.

⁹⁷ Much later in 1646, 36 Lamonts were massacred at Dunoon by troops commanded by Campbell of Argyll. The Lamonts were killed mainly by men with dirks, emphasising this weapon’s implementation in this kind of brutal scenario – they were ‘murdered with dirks’, ‘stabbed with dirks and skanes’ or had their throats cut with a ‘long durk’. See *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 199 n.1.

⁹⁸ Ronald I.M. Black, ‘Some Poems from W.J. Watson’s *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*’ (Edinburgh, 1996), 53.

⁹⁹ MacGregor, ‘The Lament’, 126-7.

¹⁰⁰ According to early Irish law texts, it was legally permissible for the victors to ‘strip the corpses of a defeated army on the battlefield’, but it was an offence to strip a corpse in any other circumstances. See Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 148.

armour and weapons confiscated.¹⁰¹ At the trial of MacGregor of Glenstrae, it was alleged the MacGregors ‘crewallie slew’ most of their Colquhoun captives after the battle of Glen Fruin in 1603,¹⁰² a claim reiterated in more specific detail in 1609, when Ailean Òg, one of Glenstrae’s followers, was apprehended for killing ‘fourty poore personis quho wer naiked and without airmour’ after the battle.¹⁰³ Judging from Ailean Òg’s charges, these men were presumably stripped of their armour and then executed.

This period certainly has a reputation for extreme violence in the Highlands and Isles, but the most infamous incidents may be apocryphal.¹⁰⁴ An atrocity that unquestionably took place was the massacre of MacLean prisoners held by Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig in the summer of 1586. The MacLean chief, Lachlann Mòr, was eventually released, but between 40 and 80 of his followers were beheaded by Aonghas’ brother, Colla.¹⁰⁵ Reportedly the prisoners were executed ‘by coupls’ (i.e. two killed per day) in MacLean’s ‘awin sight’.¹⁰⁶ This act of cold-blooded mass-murder, motivated by a desire for vengeance, shocked the government. In apparent response to this massacre, parliament passed legislation on 8 July 1587 that made all future ‘murthour or slauchter...quhair the pairtie slane is under the traist credite, assurance and power of the slayer’ a treasonable offence.¹⁰⁷ Macinnes has pointed out that after this incident there was no major ‘cold-blooded incident involving the massacre of clansmen in the guise of slaughter under trust...between the 1590s and the 1640s’.¹⁰⁸ Precursors of this magnitude are difficult to find and therefore it can be seen as fairly anomalous in Highland warfare.

Contextualising this violence is important. European warfare in the sixteenth century was pervaded by a culture of massacre, and the situation in Ireland was of particular relevance to the Highlands and Isles. Historians of early modern Ireland have recently downplayed the violent nature of the English conquest in the sixteenth century, preferring instead to focus on the administrative ‘reform’ of the country, and even blaming the Gaelic lords for the violence that ensued. However, Edwards has argued that an escalation of violence on both sides of the conflict reached unprecedented levels of

¹⁰¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 661.

¹⁰² Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 432; *RPC*, Vol. VIII, 219.

¹⁰³ *RPC*, Vol. VIII, 219. These men were presumably the same Colquhoun prisoners executed after the battle, as recorded at MacGregor of Glenstrae’s trial. See Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 432; *Infra*: 168 n.107.

¹⁰⁴ *Supra*: 18 n.52.

¹⁰⁵ *RPC*, Vol. IV, 160; *Historie of King James*, 218-222; *History of the Feuds*, 32-5; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 189-90; Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 92-3.

¹⁰⁶ *Historie of King James*, 218-222; *History of the Feuds*, 32-5; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 189-90.

¹⁰⁷ *RPS*, 1587/7/44; Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 93.

¹⁰⁸ Macinnes, ‘Slaughter Under Trust’, 130.

brutality by the 1560s and only worsened thereafter.¹⁰⁹ The involvement of the Hebridean clans in this conflict in Ireland may have hardened their approach to warfare at home and abroad, and MacGregor has suggested that the overall intensification of warfare towards the end of the sixteenth century was in step with the situation in Ireland.¹¹⁰ Even elsewhere in Scotland, mass killings were perpetrated during the Marian Civil War. The conduct of those wars escalated as they dragged on, as shown by the hanging of the 150-man garrison of Brechin in 1570. Allegedly, Regent Morton began executing prisoners to hasten the conclusion of the conflict.¹¹¹

There is of course one key difference between the killings in the Highlands and those conducted during the Marian Civil War: the violence perpetrated in the Highlands was private and unlicensed by the crown, whereas Morton was invested with royal authority that allowed him to execute these men as traitors. Although the Highlands should be judged by the same standards as elsewhere in Scotland, the identity of the individual committing violence was paramount in the sixteenth century. These isolated incidents of extreme bloodshed in the Highlands may have been shocking because they presented a clear challenge to the government's monopoly on violence. It should be emphasised that the massacre of the MacLeans in 1586 for example may have appeared to outside observers as sudden and unprompted, but the two clans' feud over Islay had been brewing for decades, and had escalated the year before when MacLean either captured MacDonald,¹¹² or propagated anti-MacDonald songs.¹¹³ These clans essentially existed in a state of war equivalent to the civil wars that wracked the country between 1568 and 1573, with all the associated potential for escalation of conduct.

There was no codified guide of the 'right' way to wage war in the Highlands and Isles, apart from the abstract and sometimes contradictory vision of bardic poetry.¹¹⁴ In war, even supposedly binding codes of conduct and honour, such as chivalry in medieval Europe, were abandoned depending on the situation.¹¹⁵ Regional differences and contingent circumstances made conflicts unique, and military leaders were complex individuals. For example, Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart's career contains flashes of

¹⁰⁹ Edwards, 'Escalation of violence', 34-8.

¹¹⁰ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 211, 221.

¹¹¹ *CSPS*, Vol. IV, 257-9; Brown, *Noble Power*, 136-7, 272 n. 57.

¹¹² *Supra*: 60-1, 66-7. The MacGregors and the Colquhouns also had a history of conflict, with the former clan launching repeated cattle raids on the lands of the latter. See *Infra*: 164-5.

¹¹³ *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 48.

¹¹⁴ *Supra*: 39-45.

¹¹⁵ Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 31-54.

brutal violence, such as his beheading of his uncle, MacLean of Coll, in 1578,¹¹⁶ yet he could exhibit mercy and restraint, as when he released hundreds of MacDonald captives into their own lands in 1595.¹¹⁷ Circumstances and political expediency influenced conduct and overall, massacres were an extraordinary occurrence in the warfare of the Highlands and Isles. Those that did occur should be properly contextualised, both within broader trends and their immediate political background.

4.4: Highlanders and Islanders in Royal Armies

As noted by Boardman, there is a ‘general tendency to downplay or ignore the contribution of Gaelic-speaking areas of the kingdom to royal armies in the medieval period’,¹¹⁸ and the same is true of the late medieval and early modern periods. In the sixteenth century, substantial bodies of men from the Highlands and Isles fought under the royal banner at Flodden in 1513, Solway Moss in 1542, Pinkie in 1547, and Glenlivet in 1594.¹¹⁹ Many died for the cause, with notable casualties, including the second earl of Argyll, falling at Flodden in particular.¹²⁰ In terms of commitment, the contribution of Scottish Highlanders and Islanders in royal armies cannot easily be faulted,¹²¹ and at some battles they were the decisive element. In 1568, the MacFarlanes turned the tide of the battle of Langside in Regent Moray’s favour by charging Argyll’s western flank when the two armies became bogged down by the interlocking sheaves of pikes along the front-lines.¹²² Sixteenth-century historians like Buchanan, Pitscottie, Lesley, and Calderwood, all highly esteemed the martial skill of the Highland soldier, to the extent that accounts of chiefs battling valiantly to salvage victory from the jaws of defeat became a well-worn trope by the end of the century.¹²³ Perhaps drawing from the well of ancient stereotypes of the warlike Gael,¹²⁴ these evocative accounts may seem embroidered, but their recurrence suggests a basis in historical fact. While Lowland Scots may have generally welcomed the contribution of

¹¹⁶ *RPC*, Vol. III, 132-5; Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 67.

¹¹⁷ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 661, 667-8.

¹¹⁸ Boardman, *Campbells*, 332; Boardman, ‘Highland Scots’, 231-53, esp. 233. C.f. Julian Goodare, *State and Society in Early Modern Scotland* (Oxford, 1999), 231.

¹¹⁹ At Pinkie for example, there may have been around 4,000 archers from the Highlands, representing just under one-fifth of the total Scottish army of c. 23,000 men. See David Caldwell, ‘Pinkie’, 73-5.

¹²⁰ Boardman, *Campbells*, 334-5.

¹²¹ Although island clans like the MacLeans of Duart and the MacNeills of Barra were found in royal armies, others like the MacDonalds of Sleat and MacLeods of Harris rarely heeded the call (although MacDonald of Lochalsh was at Flodden). Difficulties in recruitment were not just limited to the Highlands. Especially after the battle of Pinkie, the Scottish levy was increasingly reluctant to serve for more than two weeks, and often refused to cross the Border into England. See Caldwell, ‘Pinkie’, 74; Cathcart, ‘A Spent Force?’, 258; Phillips, ‘In the Shadow of Flodden’, 165-6.

¹²² *CSPS*, Vol. II, 406-7; Melville, *Memoirs*, 201-2.

¹²³ Buchanan, *History*, 368; Pitscottie, *Historie*, Vol. I, 274-6, 270-1; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. V, 350.

¹²⁴ MacGregor, ‘Gaelic Barbarity’, 23.

their Highland countrymen, on other occasions there was considerable tension between the Lowlanders and their Highland allies.¹²⁵

A broad view of the performance and conduct of the Gaels in set-piece battles may suggest discomfort when artillery was involved, which was not a regular feature of warfare in the Highlands and Isles. This unfamiliarity, coupled with the sudden and horrific injuries it could wreak, made it an understandably recurrent reason for flight. Even when cannons were used by allies, Highlanders could exhibit serious unease, as shown at the siege of Haddington in 1548. Jean de Beaugué notes that a large group of Highlanders were charging the English lines when

...the Noise of the [Scots'] Artillery, with which they had not been acquainted, soon quell'd their Courage: The Highlanders shut their Ears, and threw themselves on their Bellies at each Shout of the Cannon.¹²⁶

Rather than falling to the ground from fear however, it is possible that the Highlanders were deliberately lying prone to avoid the cannonballs and covering their ears to muffle the loud noise. That said, at both Pinkie in 1547 and Glenlivet in 1594, an artillery barrage caused Highlanders and Islanders to flee the field *en masse*.¹²⁷ According to William Patten, who accompanied the English army at Pinkie, a

...galley shot...slewe the Master of Greym with a fiue & twenty nere by him, and thearwith so skarred the iiii. thousand Irish archers brought by the Erle of Arguile, that whear...they shoulde haue bene a wyng to the forewarde, thei could neuer after be made to cum forwarde.¹²⁸

The 'Irish' under Argyll's command were allegedly the first to flee at Pinkie,¹²⁹ but they bore the brunt of the cannon barrage, and the whole army appears to have disintegrated into a mass rout almost simultaneously.¹³⁰ However, at Glenlivet the decapitation of the MacNeill leader by a cannonball caused disarray within Argyll's army, with many hundreds fleeing.¹³¹ As was the case with most late medieval or early modern armies, there

¹²⁵ *Hamilton Papers*, Vol. I, lxxi-iii; *CSPS*, Vol. I, 9; *Supra*: 88-9.

¹²⁶ *History of the Campaignes*, 19.

¹²⁷ Caldwell, 'Pinkie', 85-6.

¹²⁸ William Patten, 'The Expedicion Into Scotlande', *Fragments of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1798), 55 (separately paginated).

¹²⁹ Patten, 'Expedicion', 60.

¹³⁰ Caldwell, 'Pinkie', 84-5.

¹³¹ 'A Faithful Narrative of Balrinnis', 147; *History of the feuds*, 51; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 227; 'Account of the Battle of Balrinnis', 265-6.

would have been many unprofessional soldiers filling out the ranks who lacked the discipline of the elite. At both Pinkie and Glenlivet, a core grouping of soldiers from the Highlands and Isles, probably the elite ‘gentlemen’, stayed on the field to retreat in good order.¹³²

4.5: Castles and Sieges

As discussed in Chapter 1, castles were not understood as purely military structures and in the poetic vision of warfare, sieges were not venerated. In reality however, various castles were besieged or assaulted in the sixteenth century. The traditional siege was the tactical antithesis of the highly mobile, skirmish-warfare generally employed by Highlanders and Islanders. As the primary objective of the *creach* was not permanent occupation but the capture of resources and booty, direct contact with heavily fortified structures was typically avoided. Townships or farms were a more vulnerable and tempting target. Yet transitory cattle raids were also a direct challenge to the chief’s ability to rule and demanded swift retaliation. Failing to respond would undermine a chief and signalise weakness to predatory rivals, increasing the likelihood of a follow-up attack on his stronghold. Therefore, the siege and capture of a clan’s seat was an escalation of warfare: a statement of long-term ambitions by the attacker, and a politically loaded action that struck at the heart of the incumbent chief’s authority and legitimacy. This further explains why chiefs were expected to avenge raids on their territory, beyond the recovery of resources and honour. The measurable damage of raids could be variable, but all carried the threat of the siege, i.e., the threat of conquest.¹³³

For the attacker, an assault on castle walls presented a considerable risk, exacerbated by the fact that relatively few clans had the siege equipment necessary to effectively reduce a fortified castle.¹³⁴ In c. 1540, Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat was killed in an attempt to capture Eilean Donan castle from the MacKenzies.¹³⁵ Drawing upon natural defences, some castles were located on coastal sites, or near peninsulas and lochs, which limited an attacker’s accessibility and angle of approach.¹³⁶ According to ‘The Description’, written c. 1595, the castle of Breachacha on Coll was of ‘great strenth

¹³² Buchanan, *History*, 368; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 460; ‘A Faithful Narrative of Balrinnis’, 148; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. V, 350.

¹³³ David Cornell, ‘A Kingdom Cleared of Castles: the Role of the Castle in the Campaigns of Robert Bruce’, *SHR*, 87 (October 2008), 256.

¹³⁴ Dawson, ‘Gaelic Lordship’, 6.

¹³⁵ *HP*, Vol. I, 214-6; Gregory, *History*, 145-6.

¹³⁶ Geoffrey Stell, ‘Late Medieval Defences in Scotland’ in *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications 1100-1800*, ed. David H. Caldwell (Edinburgh, 1981), 27.

be reason of the situation thairof verie neir to the sea, quhilk defendis the half thairof, and hes three walls about the rest of the castell'.¹³⁷ The Clanranald's Castle Tioram, the MacLeods' Dunvegan Castle, the MacLeans' Duart Castle, and the Glenorchy Campbells' Kilchurn Castle are other examples of strongholds situated at defensible locations. As discussed in Chapter 3, castle garrisons were generally very small, often numbering a handful of men. Such small numbers could leave the castles vulnerable to sieges or raids, as shown during the 'Islay Rising', when Dunivaig Castle, garrisoned by only four men, was captured by the MacDonalds.¹³⁸

Protracted sieges were a rare occurrence in Gaelic warfare, and in some cases the capture of a castle appears to be the opportunistic extension of a transitory cattle raid. After the battle of Flodden in 1513, Sir Dòmhnall MacDonald of Lochalsh led an uprising to recover his father's lands and restore the Lordship of the Isles with himself at the head. Lochalsh raided the lands of Iain Grant of Freuchie, seizing Grant's recently acquired castle at Urquhart.¹³⁹ The castle garrison was expelled and the surrounding lands were looted, before being occupied by the MacDonalds for three years.¹⁴⁰ Another raid on Urquhart Castle conducted in 1546 saw the looting of the castle by the Camerons in very similar circumstances, as discussed in Chapter 5. In both 1513 and 1546, the castle garrison was spared, a notable fact that again emphasises the restraint and discipline shown by the raiders.¹⁴¹

These raids show that West Highland castles were far from impenetrable, but they could still be extremely difficult to capture, especially if the attackers lacked the crucial element of surprise. This is shown in 1570, when a long struggle flared up between the Munros and the MacKenzies over competing claims to the castle and lands of the Chanonry of Ross.¹⁴² According to Sir Robert Gordon, the Munros defended the castle for three years (presumably intermittently) 'with great slaughter on either syd' before the

¹³⁷ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 436-7.

¹³⁸ *HP*, Vol. III, 141-2; Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 369.

¹³⁹ Cathcart, *Kinship*, 136.

¹⁴⁰ Fraser, *Chiefs of Grant*, Vol. I, 62-3, 88-9.

¹⁴¹ In Europe between 1350 and 1650, the aftermath of a siege was the most likely juncture at which an atrocity would be committed in war. The intensity of the garrison's resistance to their attackers often determined the severity of their treatment, and when a garrison held for an 'unreasonable' length of time it would forfeit 'any right to clemency'. In the case of Urquhart Castle, the minimal resistance shown by the garrison on both occasions may have mitigated harsh conduct by the attackers. See Matthew Bennett, 'Legality and legitimacy in war and its conduct, 1350-1650', in *European Warfare, 1350-1750*, 276.

¹⁴² The Munros had been granted the lands by the earl of Buchan and by the Regents Moray, Lennox, and Mar, but the MacKenzies purchased Buchan's claim and promptly laid siege to the castle. See *Earldom of Sutherland*, 155.

castle was finally ‘delyvered’ to the MacKenzies by the ‘act of pacification’.¹⁴³ A strong sense of the impenetrability of castles pervades genealogical histories, which feature various stories of invincible castles captured only by the clever stratagem of a heroic figure, or the timely defection of the garrison.¹⁴⁴ A genuine case of the latter was the MacKenzies’ capture of Strome in 1602, taken ‘by treason of the captain unto whom Glengarrie had committed the custody thereof’.¹⁴⁵

The advent of new siege technology made castles look decidedly more fragile as early as 1505/6 with the gunpowder-assisted siege and capture of Stornoway castle by Huntly.¹⁴⁶ The introduction of the cannon to the region did not constitute a total revolution in siege warfare however, as the majority of nobles in Scotland, Gaelic or otherwise, had little access to such weaponry for most of the sixteenth century, leaving the government with effective monopoly of their use. Dawson has argued that the pre-eminent status of Gilleasbuig, the fifth earl of Argyll, was due in large part to his unmatched control of powerful field artillery.¹⁴⁷ The effectiveness of artillery could be limited. In October 1588, Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart besieged Mingary castle, the stronghold of his enemy MacIain of Ardnamurchan, whom he had captured earlier that year.¹⁴⁸ In September, Lachlann enlisted the unlikely help of ‘ane hundredth spanyeartis’ from the Spanish Armada, whose galleon had blown off course, landing in Tobermory Bay in Mull. These Spanish troops provided MacLean with two small cannons from their ship, and this makeshift coalition used ‘all kind of hostilitie and force, baith be fyre and swerd, that mycht be had for recovery’ of Mingary. With the help of the Spaniards and with MacIain already in his custody, Lachlann may have felt confident of success. However, after laying siege to the castle for the three days, Lachlann’s army was driven off and the garrison at Mingary relieved by ‘his Majesteis gude subjectis’.¹⁴⁹ The relatively small Spanish cannons, presumably designed to breach wooden ships not stone castles, were not powerful enough to reduce the walls.

The ubiquity of the castle across the western seaboard, with most major clans possessing at least one fortification, meant that kindreds were not easily dislodged from their territory. Even after defeat in battle, clans could retreat to their stronghold to regroup.

¹⁴³ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 155.

¹⁴⁴ *Bannatyne Manuscript*, Vol. II, 129-131; Fraser, *The Chiefs of Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 156-7; Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid*, 221.

¹⁴⁵ *History of the Feuds*, 71.

¹⁴⁶ Boardman, *Campbells*, 321; MacCoinnich, ‘Dùn Èistean’.

¹⁴⁷ Dawson, ‘Gaelic Lordship’, 6; cf. *Infra*: 145 n.95.

¹⁴⁸ *RPC*, Vol. IV, 290-1; *History of the feuds*, 35-6.

¹⁴⁹ *RPC*, Vol. IV, 341-2; *CSPS*, Vol. IX, 629, 708.

This basic function of the castle coupled with the weighty symbolism infused within their walls could provoke an extreme response, as exemplified in the feud between MacKenzie of Kintail and MacDonald of Glengarry. Castle Strome, the last fortress of the MacDonalds on the western mainland seaboard, was first captured and then blown up by Kintail in 1602/3.¹⁵⁰ The destruction rather than occupation of the castle was an act that spoke louder than words: it signalled the termination of MacDonald lordship on the west coast. Similarly, following a sequence of damaging sieges during the ‘Islay Rising’ in 1614 and 1615, Dunivaig Castle was abandoned by Sir Seumas MacDonald, and afterwards its destruction was much debated by the government.¹⁵¹ Motives for such drastic action are obvious. Demolition severed the continuity of land possession, the desolate castle serving as a constant reminder of the dissolution of the former lord’s legitimacy. As the ‘Islay Rising’ demonstrated, the ancestral fortress of the ousted clan was a natural focal point for unrest or rebellion by the previous owners. If retaken, it could serve as a base of operations for future counter-attacks against the new occupants. Reducing the castle made reclamation impossible, and in terms of imagery it was tantamount to sowing the earth with salt.¹⁵²

4.6: Naval Warfare

Contrary to the maritime image projected by the Highlands and Isles, there was almost a complete dearth of large-scale naval warfare in this period, although small-scale violence and raids were fairly common. The young chief of the MacDonalds of Glengarry was killed in 1601 when a ‘volley of musketry and arrows’ caused his galley to capsize.¹⁵³ During the ‘Islay Rising’ in 1615, Colla Ciotach was forced to run aground his galley when the hull was breached by musket fire from Cawdor’s men, and later he was ambushed near Gigha, where four of his vessels were captured.¹⁵⁴ However, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, nothing approached the scale of the battle of Bloody Bay, fought c. 1481 near Tobermory between Eoin, the last Lord of the Isles, and his son, Aonghas Òg.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, by the early seventeenth century and perhaps even earlier in the sixteenth century,

¹⁵⁰ W.C. Mackenzie, *History of the Outer Hebrides* (Paisley, 1903), 216; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 248; *History of the Feuds*, 70-1. Famously, in 1594 the king ‘rased’ Huntly’s Strathbogie Castle, along with a number of other Gordon castles. See *RPC*, Vol. V, 189; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 472. My thanks to Miles Kerr-Peterson for these references.

¹⁵¹ *Infra*: 227-8.

¹⁵² The most famous advocate of this strategy was Robert I of Scotland. See Cornell, ‘A Kingdom Cleared of Castles’, 233-57.

¹⁵³ Gregory, *History*, 299; MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 226.

¹⁵⁴ *RPC*, Vol. X, 763; *HP*, Vol. III, 299-300.

¹⁵⁵ *HP*, Vol. I, 49-50; Bannerman, ‘Lordship: Historical Background’, 210-11; Martin, ‘A Maritime Dominion’, 192; Rixson, *Galley*, 87-8.

the Scottish galley or *bírlinn* was largely ‘reduced to a transport rather than a strike role’, i.e. they served as troop transports for raids or campaigns in Scotland and Ireland.¹⁵⁶

The English ‘Ulster patrol’ which policed the Irish Sea eventually became a strong deterrent for clans seeking to engage in the mercenary trade with Ireland.¹⁵⁷ In December 1582, it was reported that a group of islanders ‘that had taken a prey’ were driven out of Ulster and forced to embark upon their galleys during a storm, during which ‘140 of them were drowned’.¹⁵⁸ In August 1584, it was reported that after a summer campaign an army of islanders returned to Scotland and ‘six gallies were taken or drowned by the Queen’s ship’.¹⁵⁹ The often overlooked defeat of the Clan Donald at the Copeland Isles in 1595 was a significant moment in the sixteenth-century Irish Sea world.¹⁶⁰ A sizeable fleet of *bírlinnean*, carrying around 1,500 men, was ambushed by two English warships, *HMS Popinjay* and *HMS Charles*. At least two *bírlinnean* were sunk, although one report claims that five were sunk and two more were captured,¹⁶¹ and ‘many’ men were killed.¹⁶² Not only was this humiliating for the MacDonalds, but it provided another vivid demonstration of the relative strength of the Hebrideans when squared against the English military. *Bírlinnean* were fast and capable of outpacing the larger English ships,¹⁶³ but in an open naval battle they were now hopelessly outmatched. A report from 1594 shows that the English government knew exactly how to deal with the Scottish galleys:

To cut off all succours from the Isles or the Main of Scotland is most easy, by sending small shipping to lie up and down abouts Lough Swillye, Lough Foile, the mouth of the Banne, the Raughlins, and Glanarum, to impeach the landing of any Scots, who are never better provided to pass the seas than in small boats, which they call galleys, vessels of no defence to maintain any fight; to accomplish which service four or five of the Queen’s small pinnaces were most convenient.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁶ MacGregor, ‘Warfare’, 213.

¹⁵⁷ Rixson, *Galley*, 45-52.

¹⁵⁸ *CSPI*, Vol. II, 418; Rixson, *Galley*, 51.

¹⁵⁹ *CSPI*, Vol. II, 525; Rixson, *Galley*, 47.

¹⁶⁰ Rixson, *Galley*, 47-8.

¹⁶¹ *CSPI*, Vol. V, 364.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 364, 370; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 688, 683. Galley crews could range from 22 to 72 men, so the loss of two ships may indicate the death of between 40 and 140 men.

¹⁶³ *CSPI*, Vol. V, 412.

¹⁶⁴ *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. III, 107.

Another death knell of the Hebridean galley was the ‘Islay Rising’ in 1615, in which the MacDonalds of Dunivaig were outmanoeuvred and outgunned by James VI and I’s navy, including ships and captains sourced from Ireland.¹⁶⁵

4.7: Conclusion

Warfare in the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland was conducted according to a limited range of tactics and strategy, and yet there are inherent problems in generalising the conduct of warfare or the level of violence in the region. The predominant mode of warfare was the cattle raid, which was mainly aimed towards enrichment but could involve direct bloodshed. More serious engagements – skirmishes or battles – were less common, and tended to be the culmination of a series of smaller incursions. In terms of battle tactics, perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the attack-minded approach to ‘Gaelic’ warfare, as many of the most prominent battles in this period involved defensive tactics. There is considerable evidence that armies in the West Highlands and Isles exhibited a high degree of discipline, while also allowing for individuals to win renown in battle through feats of courage and bravery. Close combat could be brutal especially in regards to the ruthless violence perpetrated during the rout and pursuit of a defeated enemy, which was probably considered an intrinsic aspect of warfare. Massacres of prisoners or civilians may have taken place on occasion, but not with the regularity, or on the scale, that has generally been assumed. Castles were the hub of the military class and potent symbols of lordship that were occasionally targeted by military incursions. Large-scale sieges, as found elsewhere in Britain, Ireland, and the European mainland, were not practised by Highlanders and Islanders, with most castles captured by stratagem or surprise. Although the sea power of Gaeldom was on the wane in this period, small-scale piracy continued in the Outer Hebrides, and the *bírlinn* remained indispensable for speedily navigating the sea-lanes of the west coast and transporting huge bodies of troops across the Irish Sea.

¹⁶⁵ *Infra*: 214-28.

Part 2: Case Studies

Chapter 5: The Clanranald, 1544-77

The battle of Loch Lochy on 15 July 1544, more commonly known as *Blàr nan Lèine* or ‘The Battle of the Shirts’, has attained iconic status in the history of the Highlands.¹ A resounding defeat for the Clan Fraser at the hands of the Clanranald, it is perhaps best remembered for the memorable detail, first reported in the *Chronicles of the Frasers*, that the weather was so oppressively hot during the battle that combatants from both clans discarded their coats of mail and fought wearing only their shirts or *lèintean*.² Some contemporary documentary evidence of the battle survives, but a detailed reconstruction is reliant on later genealogical histories. All of these sources portray the battle according to a specific agenda and were not written in a vacuum. One of the more modest accounts of *Blàr nan Lèine* is actually provided by the victors, the Clanranald, in their clan history the ‘Red Book of Clanranald’, written in the late seventeenth century:

[Iain Muideartach] gained a battle over Fraser of Lovat at Loch Lochy Head, which is called Blar Lèine, about the year of the age of Christ 1545.³

The author Niall MacMhuirich deliberately downplays the significance of the battle in Iain Muideartach’s career, choosing instead to emphasise his piety and generosity in refutation of George Buchanan’s portrayal of the Clanranald chief in *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* as a cruel warmonger.⁴ In marked contrast, the history of the kindred that suffered calamitous defeat at the battle provides a detailed and undoubtedly embroidered description of the background politicking and bloody *mêlée* itself. Written between 1666 and 1699,⁵ the *Chronicles of the Frasers* adheres closely to basic foundations laid down by Buchanan,⁶ Lesley,⁷ and to a lesser extent Gordon,⁸ with added narrative flourishes, such as a final speech by Fraser of Lovat before the battle.⁹ As a result, the battle is transformed from decisive defeat to heroic last-stand:

¹ This engagement is the only pitched battle from the sixteenth-century Highlands and Isles recorded by Historic Scotland’s ‘Inventory of Scottish Battlefields’, which aims to identify Scotland’s ‘most important battlefields to aid their management into the future’. See ‘The Inventory of Historic Battlefields’ <<http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/index/heritage/battlefields/inventorybattlefields.htm>>

² *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 137-9; *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, Vol. IV, liv-v.

³ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 170-1.

⁴ George Buchanan, *The History of Scotland*, Vol. II, ed. James Aikman (Glasgow, 1827), 348.

⁵ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, xix.

⁶ Buchanan, *History*, 348. The Fraser history contains an excerpt from Buchanan’s account of the battle.

⁷ John Lesley, *The History of Scotland*, ed. Bannatyne Club (Edinburgh, 1830), 184.

⁸ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 139, 142 n.1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

This was the most unparalleled battle that story records; I never read, never heard, of such another.¹⁰

Cross-comparison of these histories in tandem with other contemporary evidence can scrape away accreted embellishments to reveal core details consistent across all accounts. This case study will firstly focus on the political background to *Blàr nan Lèine*, before tracing the political and social ramifications of the battle over the following 30 years. A government campaign led by the earls of Huntly and Argyll in 1554 and 1555 against the Clanranald will be placed in the spotlight, followed by a small-scale local feud in 1576 and 1577 between the Clanranald and the MacLeods of Harris over the lands of Glenelg. The aftershocks of *Blàr nan Lèine* were not limited to the immediate participants, the Clanranald and the Clan Fraser, but also affected proximate clans like the Camerons, the MacDonalds of Keppoch, the MacDonalds of Glengarry, and the MacLeods of Harris.

The Dòmhnall Dubh rising of 1544 and 1545, which runs parallel to the upheaval surrounding the Clanranald, has been highlighted by contemporaries and modern historians alike as a consequence of the power vacuum caused by the sudden death of James V in 1542.¹¹ The ‘strong rule’ of James V towards the Highlands and Isles, encapsulated by his expedition in 1540, was admired by contemporaries such as John Elder and John Lesley,¹² as well as later historians like Donald Gregory.¹³ However, the king’s ‘daunting of the Isles’ had deleterious effects on the ‘greit quietnes and obedience’ of the Highlands and Isles.¹⁴ During the tour, James received the submission of most prominent clan chiefs, including MacLeod of Harris, MacLeod of Lewis, MacLean of Duart, MacDonald of Dunivaig, MacDonald of Sleat, and ‘Johne Moydert’ or Iain Muideartach, the Clanranald chief. According to Lesley, the ‘principallis of thame wes keipit in warde’, but as argued by Gregory, only some of the ‘principallis’ were actually detained and Iain Muideartach was among them.¹⁵ These clans were therefore left temporarily leaderless, a situation that affected the Clanranald most profoundly due to the existence of another claimant to the chiefship. The Fraser history states that Ùisdean Fraser, Lord Lovat:

...entered his nephew, Ranald Mackdonel, into the peaceable possession of Mudard [Moidart], being the true heir male of that estates. This, among other gums and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹¹ *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, 24; Cathcart, ‘Donald Dubh’s Rebellion’, 248-9.

¹² *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, 24; Lesley, *History*, 156-7.

¹³ Gregory, *History*, 146-50.

¹⁴ Lesley, *History*, 156-7; Cameron, *James V*, 228,

¹⁵ Lesley, *History*, 156-7; Gregory, *History*, 148; Cameron, *James V*, 245-8.

picks harboured against the Lord Lovat, exasperated the Mackdonalds further, which brought them together in a body marching another way to obviate Lovat...¹⁶

The Clanranald history does not directly mention this takeover, but acknowledges Ragnall Gallda ('Foreigner' or 'Stranger') as the youngest son of the Clanranald chief, Ailean (d. c. 1509) and his second wife, the daughter of Fraser of Lovat.¹⁷ When Ailean died, the chiefship passed to his eldest son Ragnall (born of his first marriage to the daughter of MacIain of Ardnamurchan), who died in 1514 and was succeeded by his son Dubhghall. Upon Dubhghall's death, killed by his cousins according to the Sleat history,¹⁸ his uncle Alasdair, another son of Ailean (d. c. 1509) succeeded, and he was eventually followed c. 1531 by his son, Iain Muideartach.¹⁹

The main pretence for Ragnall's challenge was probably Iain Muideartach's illegitimacy. The Sleat history calls him a 'natural brother' who took possession of the chiefship 'in an unlawful manner',²⁰ and Sellar has suggested that his mother Dorothy (Dìorbhail) may have been of low social status.²¹ Yet this does not seem to have adversely affected his standing within the clan. Although Hugh MacDonald was speaking from hindsight when he remarked that Iain was 'without doubt... a man truly worthy of the preferment',²² his strong personality may well have marked him out as a clear leader from the outset. Any doubts about his chiefship caused by his illegitimacy were arguably quashed when he was legitimised at Stirling on 15 January 1531/2.²³ One month later on 11 February 1531/2, James V granted him a charter for the 27 merklands of Moidart.²⁴

By 1540 however, the crown backed another candidate, Iain's uncle Ragnall Gallda, who disputed Iain's chiefship. During Iain's imprisonment, the king received unspecified 'informatione' about his chiefship and revoked his claim to the lands.²⁵ The nature of this information is not clear, although it is unlikely to have been related to Iain's illegitimacy due to his legitimation in 1531. Regardless, on 14 December 1540, Ragnall Gallda was granted the 28 merklands of Moidart and the 24 merklands of Arisaig in the

¹⁶ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 134.

¹⁷ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 168-9; *RSS*, Vol. II, 590.

¹⁸ *HP*, Vol. I, 64-5.

¹⁹ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 166-71; *Monro's Western Isles*, 93-4. The Clanranald genealogy is shown in Appendix 2.1.

²⁰ *HP*, Vol. I, 64-5.

²¹ W.D.H. Sellar, 'Marriage, Divorce and Concubinage in Gaelic Scotland', *TGSI*, 51 (1978-80), 482.

²² *HP*, Vol. I, 65.

²³ *RSS*, Vol. II, 146.

²⁴ *NRS*: GD201/1/1; GD201/1/2; *RMS*, Vol. III, 247.

²⁵ *RMS*, Vol. III, 510.

sheriffdom of Inverness.²⁶ Then on 12 March 1541, the crown bestowed further territory on Ragnall: the 21 merklands of Eigg.²⁷ It is somewhat difficult to determine the nature of Ragnall Gallda's rise to power. The Frasers, Ragnall's mother's clan, certainly had an obvious interest in his claim to the chiefship, and their participation in the eventual battle stems from their continued sponsorship of him.²⁸ At this juncture, Lovat and perhaps even his overlord Huntly may have vouched for Ragnall to secure his confirmation in the Clanranald estates.

The sudden death of James V on 14 December 1542 initiated a power struggle among the leaders of the Scottish political community, and the incarcerated Highland chiefs were used as political pawns. At some point before August 1543, perhaps as early as June,²⁹ Regent Arran, with the advice of the earl of Glencairn,³⁰ released 'certain Irish, which have been long in ward' to stir up trouble in the Highlands and Isles for Argyll and Huntly, thereby depriving his rival, Cardinal Beaton, of their support.³¹ Iain Muideartach was almost certainly among these 'Irish' and Dòmhnall Dubh may have been released at the same time, although as shown by Boardman and Cathcart, reports about Dòmhnall Dubh's release are conflicting and confusing.³²

Political uncertainty stemming from Arran's leadership, and perhaps the release of the islanders, prompted Huntly to accept a bond of manrent from Ùisdean Fraser, Lord Lovat, on 2 May 1543, one of a flurry of similar contracts arranged in that month by Huntly with other clans, including the Clan Cameron and Clan Chattan.³³ Huntly was buttressing his support with clans within and adjacent to his Badenoch heartland in the central Highlands and his tendrils spread further west through an 'equale bande' with the earl of Argyll on 1 August 1543, in which the two earls pledged to protect or avenge the

²⁶ *RSS*, Vol. II, 562.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 590.

²⁸ The epithet of 'Gallda' suggests that Ragnall was considered an outsider by the Clanranald. He may have been fostered by the Frasers. See MacDonald & MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, Vol. II, 259.

²⁹ *Sadler State Papers*, Vol. I, 194, 214; Gregory, *History*, 155.

³⁰ Argyll and Glencairn were already at feud. See *Sadler State Papers*, Vol. I, 274-5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 274-5. The two earls had been mooted as possible governors of Scotland and opposed Arran's appointment to the regency. See Ritchie, *Mary of Guise*, 157; Marcus Merriman, *The Rough Wooings: Mary Queen of Scots, 1542-1551* (East Linton, 2000), 124, 157.

³² Boardman, *Campbells*, 282, 290 n. 109; Cathcart, 'Donald Dubh's Rebellion', 253-4.

³³ Clan Cameron bond: 3 May; Allardcye bond: 10 May; Clan Chattan bond: 12 May. See *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 207-11.

other.³⁴ This solidified their loose political alliance based upon mutual support of Mary of Guise.³⁵

The movements of Iain Muideartach until July 1544 are unknown, but it seems plausible that he convened with Dòmhnall Dubh, assuming they were indeed released simultaneously. By the summer of 1544, Iain had rallied enough military support to viably challenge Ragnall Gallda's grip on the chiefship, perhaps by drawing upon Dòmhnall Dubh's resources.³⁶ It has generally been assumed that he mustered support from his own kindred: through the consensus of the clan, the unpopular Ragnall Gallda was expelled and Iain reinstated as the rightful chief.³⁷ Some accounts indicate that Iain had indeed retaken his chiefship by the time of the battle.³⁸ Although Ragnall's epithet 'Gallda' ('Stranger') was not intrinsically pejorative, it may nevertheless convey that in this case his upbringing among the Frasers had alienated him from the Clanranald. His installation was ostensibly made at the behest of his mother's clan, but Huntly may well have been orchestrating the takeover behind-the-scenes with a view to extending his own overlordship in the west. Either way, this was an unacceptable imposition upon the clan Ragnall Gallda hoped to lead. The situation must have been a source of widespread resentment within the Clanranald, and the release of Iain Muideartach, a man of evident ability and experience in leadership, could well have instigated Ragnall Gallda's deposition.³⁹ This interpretation is supported by a letter written in August or September 1545 by Dòmhnall Dubh's commissioners during their negotiations with Henry VIII, which claims that Iain Muideartach's actions were purely defensive, and portrays the eventual defeat of the Frasers as a rare victory among the many 'cruelties' committed by the crown and its adherents against the Highlanders and Islanders.⁴⁰ From the perspective of the Clanranald and their supporters, the battle was regarded as a necessary act in defence of a legitimate chiefship. Solidarity with Iain's undertaking is evidenced by the coalition of clans that supported him at the battle, which included the Camerons, the MacDonalds of

³⁴ *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 210-11.

³⁵ Merriman, *Rough Wooings*, 157; David Franklin, *The Scottish Regency of the Earl of Arran* (Lewiston, 1995), 124.

³⁶ Buchanan's account of the battle in 1544 places it against a backdrop of Dòmhnall Dubh's rising. See Buchanan, *History*, 348.

³⁷ Gregory, *History*, 158-9; MacDonald & MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, Vol. II, 261-3. One tradition maintains that Ragnall Gallda was shocked by the amount of cattle slaughtered for his inauguration, and suggested 'a few hens' be killed instead. His kinsmen were so offended by his parsimonious attitude that he was immediately deposed. See Charles MacDonald, *Moidart: Among the Clanranald*, ed. John Watt (Birlinn, 1997), 38-9, 54 n.3.

³⁸ Lesley, *History*, 184; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110.

³⁹ Perhaps Ragnall Gallda's chiefship would have been accepted if there had not been a credible and proven alternative in the form of Iain Muideartach.

⁴⁰ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, XX.II, 134-5.

Keppoch, and the MacDonalds of Glengarry.⁴¹ Ragnall Gallda's installation may have been regarded as a dangerous precedent that demanded a strong response.

A principal point of contention among the histories is the role played by Huntly and whether he defended the Frasers or conspired in their downfall. Throughout *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*, Buchanan portrays the Gordons as untrustworthy rebels, and claims that in this instance Huntly engineered the destruction of the Frasers by forewarning the Clanranald about their route homewards. According to Buchanan's somewhat puzzling account, Huntly 'indulged a secret hatred against them, because of all the adjacent tribes they alone refused to acknowledge his superiority'.⁴² Unsurprisingly, this notion was vehemently refuted by Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun:

...[this] is notoriouslie known to be manifestlie and notoriouslie vntruth...[Buchanan's account] is to be postponed to the testimonie of authentick and famous writers.⁴³

Gordon follows Lesley whose pro-Catholic account unsurprisingly differs from Buchanan in its more positive portrayal of Huntly and its description of the immediate circumstances before the battle. Lesley claims that the Clanranald and the Clan Cameron had harried and occupied the Frasers' lands of Abertarrf and Strathglass, and (in a probable conflation with the 1545 attacks discussed below) the Grants' lands of Urquhart and Glenmoriston. These encroachments prompted an armed response from Huntly:

...the Erle marching forduart with his cumpanie maid thame sone to dislodge, and to flie in thair awin cuntrey apoun the west seis, quhair Lawland men culd haif no acces unto thame, and so placed the Lorde Lovat and the laird of Grant in thair awine landis of Urquhat, and Abirtarf, and Stragalshe; and the Erle sua haiffing done for the moist parte that thing he come for, returnit; bot the Lord Lovat returning to Lovat be ane uther way, accompaneit online with his owin kyne of the Fresers, be chaunce forgadderit with his ennemeis, quhair none of the parteis culd abstene from battell...⁴⁴

⁴¹ RSS, Vol. III, 463.

⁴² Buchanan, *History of Scotland*, Vol. II, 348.

⁴³ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110. Buchanan's stance was nevertheless adopted by the Fraser and Mackintosh histories, which assert that Huntly instigated or oversaw the ambush of the Frasers. The Mackintoshes' rivalry with the Gordons meant they were probably happy to add fuel to the fire of their villainy. Gordon's own family connections raise obvious questions as to his partiality.

⁴⁴ Lesley, *History*, 184.

Lesley may be eliding the real reason for Huntly's western incursion – supporting Ragnall Gallda's chiefship – in favour of presenting him as acting defensively on behalf of his subordinates. Other evidence chimes with the idea of a close alignment between Huntly and Fraser in 1544. As already shown, they had exchanged a bond of manrent in 1543, but both were members of the Guise faction at court. On 3 June 1544, the Regent Arran was removed from office by Guise's 'party', including Huntly and Argyll,⁴⁵ and on 10 June, Fraser of Lovat was recorded as another supporter of Guise.⁴⁶ Therefore, a conspiracy by Huntly against his allies and vassals seems rather unlikely.⁴⁷

Factionalism in the Scottish court ultimately exerted little influence over political affairs in Moidart and Lochaber. Violence was probably initiated when Iain Muideartach reclaimed his chiefship with the assent of most of his kin and with assistance from allies like the Camerons. To underline his control, he may have raided the Frasers' lands of Abertarrf and Strathglass,⁴⁸ prompting an armed response from Huntly and the Frasers (with Ragnall Gallda), which the Clanranald circumvented and out-manoeuvred. One source claims that the Clanranald and Frasers had arranged a 'tryst' that descended into slaughter,⁴⁹ but accounts of the battle generally agree that the Clanranald ambushed the badly outnumbered Frasers at Laggan⁵⁰ on the northern banks of Loch Lochy.⁵¹ Marching from Moidart, the Frasers had two main routes home to Abertarrf: through the hillier terrain north of Loch Arkaig, moving east between Loch Garry and Loch Lochy, or the flatter southern route, following Loch Arkaig east and then swinging north-east at the southern banks of Loch Lochy. The Fraser history implies that they took the latter route, 'directly down the south side of Lochy Lochy', and mentions that the host marched past Letterfinlay on the east bank of the loch.⁵² Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the Frasers travelled via the southern route, while the Clanranald took the hillier northern path to ambush the Frasers at Laggan.

⁴⁵ Merriman, *Rough Wooings*, 157; Franklin, *Scottish Regency*, 124.

⁴⁶ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, XIX.I, 415-6.
415-6.

⁴⁷ There may be a feasible argument that Regent Arran compelled the Clanranald to attack the Frasers, as he had more to gain from such disorder, but there is no direct evidence for this.

⁴⁸ Lesley, *History*, 184.

⁴⁹ *A Diurnal of Remarkable Occurents*, ed. Bannatyne Club (Edinburgh, 1833), 34. This source is problematic however, as it erroneously claims that the earl of Bothwell was en route to mediate this 'tryst' when he discovered the aftermath of the battle. Gregory has suggested that Bothwell was an error for Huntly. See Gregory, *History*, 160-1, n.1.

⁵⁰ NGR: NN 53594 89615.

⁵¹ Buchanan, *History*, Vol. II, 348; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 136-7; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110. Lesley does state that the two armies encountered each other 'be chance'. See Lesley, *History*, 184.

⁵² *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 134-5.

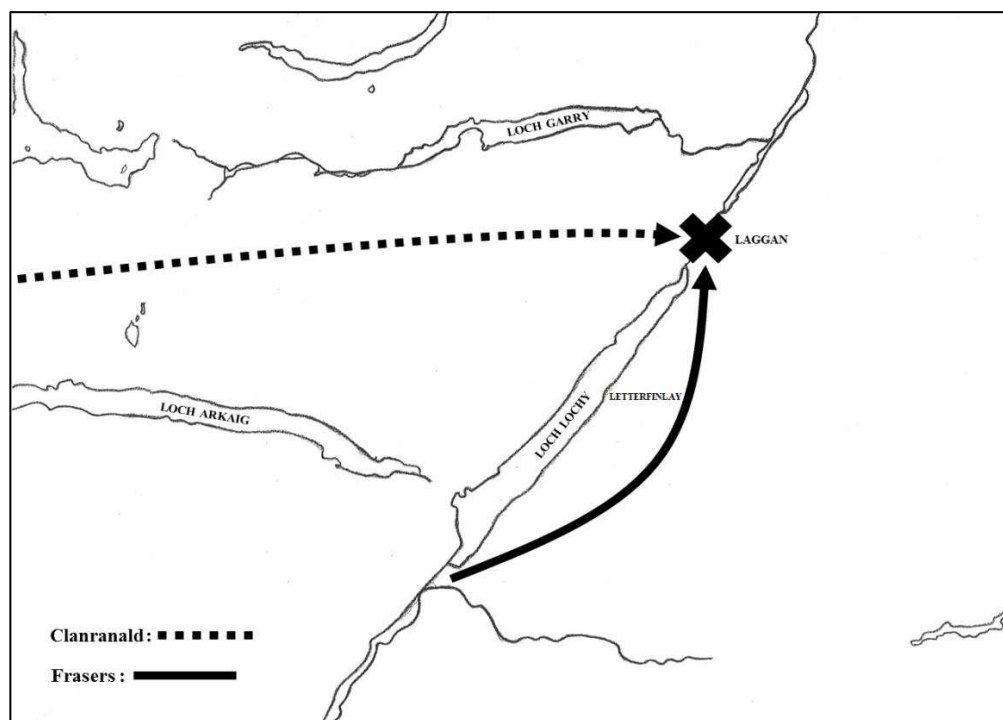


Figure 4: Possible army movements before *Blàr nan Lèine*, 1544

The high casualties sustained by the Frasers perhaps indicate that they had no means of escape once fighting ensued. Therefore, the case could be made that they actually travelled along the northern route, perhaps taking to the hills because they suspected something untoward, and when the Clanranald ambushed them at Laggan they were trapped against the southern banks of Loch Garry and could not flee east into their own lands. However, the ambush by the Clanranald may simply have been so sudden that the Frasers had little time to coordinate a retreat, especially if they were outnumbered by their opponents.⁵³ The high casualty rate, notably among the clan elite, may also be explained by a desire to maintain their honour by fighting to the end.

The Clanranald were joined by the Camerons, the MacDonalds of Keppoch, the MacDonalds of Glengarry, and the MacDonalds of Knoydart.⁵⁴ Lesley's account of the battle emphasises the extent of the bloodshed, and describes a skirmish at range before the close-quarters fighting took place:

...bot suddantlie entered in skarmushing, first with bowis and arrous, quhilkis lested a long tyme, quhill thair hoill chaftis was spendit on boith sydis; and shortlie thay joynit in battell with suordis, quhair thay faucht so crewellie quhill the most part of boith the armies was slayne...at last the nycht come doun apoun thame, and

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁴ *RSS*, Vol. III, 463.

was not knawin quhill the nixt day quhilkis of the parteis was maister of the feildis...⁵⁵

As mentioned, the Fraser history amplifies the ferocity of the battle, making it an exceptionally brutal affair:

...[it was] a hott ingagement, fought more like Lyons than men, with slashes and stroakes, their armes two handed swords and Dence axes, front to front, forceing upon each other, so fierce and forward that they seemed to fell one another like trees falling in a wood, cutting and consumeing down each other...till at last they came to closs combating, and, fighting hand to fist...At length, in their heat and fury, two and [two] runn into the Loch, grapling and, lik wrestlers, sticked on another with their durks, many, nay, most fought in their shirts, running at each other like mastives; till in end all fought in bloud and goare, few or non escaping to carry newes home.⁵⁶

Both the Fraser and Mackintosh accounts of the battle mention an auxiliary Fraser force led by 'Bean Clerach', whose absence from the battle proved decisive, but they disagree on why his force was not involved. According to the Fraser history, 'Bean Clerach' was sent by Lovat with 100 bowmen to

...guard a passe, and if need were to assist him if he mett with danger, and strive to be within sight of him. Bean Clerk [sic] goes on, and, mistakeing his direction, kept out of sight beyond Drumglach most inadvertently, so that he was off no use to the host.⁵⁷

In contrast, the Mackintosh account claims that he 'did in the very beginning of the fight most treacherously run away with his company' and abandoned his chief to be slaughtered.⁵⁸

Most accounts agree that the losses on both sides were extremely heavy,⁵⁹ although Gregory has rightly doubted if the Clanranald losses were truly as severe.⁶⁰ Buchanan emphasises the heavy casualties of the Frasers and implies a very one-sided engagement by

⁵⁵ Lesley, *History*, 184. See also: *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110; *A Chronicle of the Family of Mackintosh to 1680*, ed. Jean Munro (Clan Chattan Association, 1998), 36.

⁵⁶ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 136-7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁸ *Chronicle of Mackintosh*, 36.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; Buchanan, *History*, Vol. II, 348; Lesley, *History*, 184-5; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110.

⁶⁰ Gregory, *History*, 162.

stating ‘the Frasers being fewer in number, were almost cut off to a man’.⁶¹ The Frasers, in order to save face in their own history, claimed that only a handful of warriors from either side were left standing by the end of the battle:

...it is thought that but one of an hundred escaped on either sides; of the Frasers onely 4 came alive out of the field...⁶²

The Clanranald and MacDonalds of Knoydart were the ‘most slain’ of their party, but the death of Ùisdean, the Fraser chief, his eldest son Simon,⁶³ and 300 other Fraser clansmen meant the ‘hurt seemed greater on their pairt’.⁶⁴ This figure of 300 dead is roughly supported by the letter written by Dòmhnall Dubh’s commissioners, which stated that Iain Muideartach in his defence

...slew the Lord Lowett, his sounn and air, his thre brethir, w^t xiii scoir of men.⁶⁵

An anonymous report for the English government from 1577 on the condition of the Scottish nobility claims that the Fraser chief and ‘all his kin and friends’ were killed in the battle.⁶⁶ The severity of the Frasers’ casualties spawned an apocryphal story to explain how the clan survived:

Thus would have perished one of the most numerous, and deserving of the Scottish clans, unless by divine providence, as we may believe, eighty of the principal men of the clan had left their wives pregnant, who, in due time, brought forth males, all of whom arrived safely at man’s estate.⁶⁷

There is little reason to doubt the devastation wrought by this battle, and the military capacity of the Frasers was probably crippled for at least a generation. Continuity in leadership was maintained through Alasdair, a surviving son of the Fraser chief, but in the aftermath of the battle he was too young to immediately succeed. Management of the clan’s estates was undertaken by his mother, Janet Ross, until Alasdair was confirmed in

⁶¹ Buchanan, *History*, Vol.II, 348

⁶² *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 138. This source estimates the Clanranald army at 500 or 600 men, meaning only five or six men survived the battle. See *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶³ Simon, ‘a youth of singular hope, and brought vp in France’. See *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110.

⁶⁴ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110; Lesley, *History*, 184-5; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 137-40. The Fraser history estimated Lovat’s force at 300 men, perhaps suggesting that, if these evaluations are accurate, the Frasers’ were indeed killed to a man.

⁶⁵ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, XX.II, 134-5.

⁶⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. V, 263.

⁶⁷ Buchanan, *History*, Vol. II, 348. This is repeated almost verbatim by various other accounts. See Lesley, *History*, 184-5; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 139-40.

the barony of Lovat on 29 August 1553.⁶⁸ In the event of a minority chiefship, leadership of a clan normally passed to an elder male relative who might act as ‘tutor’, but as noted by the Fraser history:

Whatever need there was of a tutor non is extent to officiat, being all cut off in the battle.⁶⁹

Senior male relatives able to fulfil that advisory role must indeed have been limited because Ùisdean’s three brothers were also killed in the battle.⁷⁰

The actions of the Clanranald in the aftermath of the battle are not indicative of a clan enfeebled by a Pyrrhic victory. Iain soon joined Dòmhnall Dubh’s rising and immediately achieved a prominent status within the company.⁷¹ Some members of the Clanranald joined with the Camerons in a raid on the Grants’ lands of Glenmoriston in October 1544, and Urquhart Castle six months later in April 1545. The main leaders of this raid appear to have been the Camerons, but some members of the Clanranald are named as complicit in Regent Arran’s discharge to the Grants on 20 July 1546.⁷² Iain Muideartach himself was probably not involved as in his eventual contract with Huntly in September 1553 his ‘last offens and brak’ is recorded as the battle in 1544, not the raids of 1544 and 1545 which had also targeted one of Huntly’s tenants.⁷³ Despite the raid on Glenmoriston in the previous year, the attack on Urquhart in 1545 seems to have taken the Grants entirely by surprise as the castle was immediately stormed in a swift assault. Urquhart Castle was extensively looted, including 100 cows, 100 calves, ‘ane kyst’ which held ‘thre hundreitht pundis of money’, and ‘twenty pece of artailzery’.⁷⁴ Evidently the raid was so unexpected the Grants had no opportunity to hide their loot or mount a stout defence. The prospect of plunder must have been a powerful motive for the attack on Urquhart Castle and a transient raid, aimed at harassment and enrichment, would have provided a tangible reward for the victorious Camerons and Clanranald. Moreover, Urquhart Castle was probably attacked specifically because the Grants were, like the Frasers, a client clan of the earl of Huntly. On 25 March 1545, the Grants had signed a contract with Huntly, both

⁶⁸ *Exchequer Rolls*, Vol. XVIII, 558-9; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 140-1.

⁶⁹ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 140.

⁷⁰ *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, XX.II, 134-5.

⁷¹ *State Papers: King Henry the Eighth*, Vol. III (1834), 548; Bannerman, ‘Lordship: Historical Background’, 212-3; Cathcart, ‘Donald Dubh’s Rebellion’, 241.

⁷² Fraser, *Chiefs of Grant*, Vol. III, 98. (transcript of original). As noted, Lesley and Gordon maintain that the Clanranald in particular suffered heavy casualties, and so this may explain the apparent leadership by the Camerons.

⁷³ *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 222-3.

⁷⁴ Fraser, *Chiefs of Grant*, Vol. I, 112-3 (transcript of original); Cathcart, *Kinship*, 138.

parties pledging to abstain from convening with ‘the Ilia men, Clanchamron nor Clanrannald, without the [advys] of vthiris’.⁷⁵ This was a projection of the military capabilities of the Clanranald and their allies, conclusively underlining Iain Muideartach’s hold on his chiefly position and humiliating Huntly by demonstrating his failure to protect his vassals. Urquhart Castle was also a stronghold of significance for revivalists of the Lordship of the Isles. In 1513, Dòmhnall MacDonald of Lochalsh had taken and occupied Urquhart Castle for three years in a symbolic reclamation of the Lordship of Isles and the earldom of Ross, and the 1545 raid may have been a signifier of future MacDonald ambitions.⁷⁶

In 1546, Huntly retaliated at the ‘grievous wound’ suffered by his clients by capturing and beheading Eòghann mac Ailein, captain of the Clan Cameron, and Ragnall MacDonald of Keppoch.⁷⁷ Both of these chiefs had participated in *Blàr nan Lèine* and the follow-up raids on the Grants. Huntly may have had a personal stake in apprehending the Cameron chief in particular, as Eòghann’s military actions flagrantly contravened the terms of the bond of manrent they exchanged in May 1543.⁷⁸ Following the death of Dòmhnall Dubh in 1545, both chiefs, along with Iain Muideartach,⁷⁹ had been among the most prominent supporters of the new self-proclaimed Lord of the Isles, Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig. Before his apprehension, the Cameron chief wrote to the English government, endorsing Seumas as the ‘narrast of heir to the hows of the Islis’ and requesting ‘munitione of werr and money’ from Henry VIII to resist Huntly and Argyll.⁸⁰ Bannerman has suggested that their execution discouraged MacDonald of Dunivaig from further pursuing his claim,⁸¹ and Huntly’s swift action may have been a preventative measure to thwart another Clan Donald uprising. According to Lesley, this ‘sharp punishment’ of Cameron and Keppoch alarmed Iain Muideartach and he ‘fled into the Ilis, quhair he keped him self during all the tyme of the warris’.⁸²

⁷⁵ Fraser, *Chiefs of Grant*, Vol. III, 94. (transcript of original).

⁷⁶ Cathcart, *Kinship*, 136.

⁷⁷ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 110; *Chronicle of Mackintosh*, 37; *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, liv-v; Gregory, *History*, 179.

⁷⁸ *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 208.

⁷⁹ *State Papers: Henry VIII*, Vol. III, 548.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 548-9.

⁸¹ Bannerman, ‘Lordship: Historical Background’, 213.

⁸² Lesley, *History*, 185. Further action may have been taken against the Clanranald’s allies in May 1546 when the Mackintosh chief, presumably at Huntly’s behest, harried the lands of MacDonald of Glengarry and ‘killed such of the Country people as made opposition’. See *Chronicle of Mackintosh*, 37.

Ultimately, the Clanranald chief did not meet the same fate as his allies and Huntly's failure to capture Iain Muideartach is intriguing and ambiguous. It could lend credence to Buchanan's assertion that Huntly was complicit in *Blàr nan Lèine*, but this explanation is clearly undermined by the execution of Cameron and Keppoch. Perhaps instead Huntly was reluctant to risk conflict with the Clanranald, who still posed a potent threat to a magnate even as powerful as Huntly. Alternatively, Huntly may have had genuine difficulty in reaching Castle Tioram on the banks of Loch Moidart. As stated by Gordon, the Clanranald stronghold was

...defended pairtlye by the west sea, and pairtlye included about with mountanes, stopped Huntlye so, that he might have no passage vnto them.⁸³

However, Huntly's route would probably have been directly through the Great Glen, and he succeeded in apprehending other participants in the battle located in similarly western locations. Perhaps his inaction was simply a matter of timing. Pursuit of Iain may have been prevented by Henry VIII's invasion during the 'Rough Wooing': Huntly was a notable participant at the battle of Pinkie in 1547 where he was captured.⁸⁴

The Clanranald were summoned to join with the Scottish army in 1547, but Iain Muideartach and his clan stayed at home. Perhaps surprisingly, the government responded with leniency and issued a respite to Iain⁸⁵ at Musselburgh on 27 August 1548

...for thair tressonable remaning and abyding at hame fra oure soverane ladyis oist and army, devisit and ordanit to convene upoun Fawlaymure the last day of August the year of God (1547) yeris, for resisting of the protectour of Inghland and his army than beand within this realme for distructioun of the liegis thair of; and for the slauchter of the Lord Lowett and his complices at [blank] the year of God (154[blank]) yeris...⁸⁶

It has been suggested that Arran was desperately trying to shore up support following the Scots' defeat at Pinkie in 1547 and the subsequent occupation of much of south-eastern Scotland by the English army.⁸⁷

⁸³ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 109.

⁸⁴ Cathcart, *Kinship*, 181-2; Caldwell, 'Pinkie', 61-95.

⁸⁵ Along with his brother Aonghas, his son Ruairidh, and MacDonald of Glengarry and MacDonald of Knoydart.

⁸⁶ *RSS*, Vol. III, 463.

⁸⁷ MacDonald & MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, Vol. II, 276-7; Merriman, *Rough Wooings*, 258-64,

In 1550, six years after *Blàr nan Lèine*, Iain Muideartach resurfaced on the political scene as an associate of Argyll. On 27 June 1550, Iain Muideartach was named as a witness in Argyll's arbitration of an internecine dispute within the MacLeods of Harris.⁸⁸ Formal reestablishment of amicable relations between Argyll and Huntly may have allowed the Clanranald chief to finally raise his head above the parapet. An indenture of marriage was arranged on 10 July of 1549 between Argyll's eldest son Gilleasbuig and Huntly's daughter Margaret, for the 'conservatioune of the auld allya betuix thai howsis'.⁸⁹ Association with Argyll protected Iain Muideartach from any potential threat still posed by Huntly.

In 1552, the Clanranald and the Camerons were summoned to appear before a justice ayre convened by Mary of Guise and the Regent Arran at Inverness, but they failed to appear and were condemned for their 'inobedience' in October. Argyll spoke on behalf of Iain Muideartach, assuring Guise and Arran of the 'gud mynd and will he beris towart our Soverane Lady [and] my Lord Governour'. Argyll claimed that the Clanranald chief would have made an appearance at Inverness had the letter of summons reached him before he travelled to Ireland. Given the benefit of the doubt, Iain was ordered to appear before the Privy Council next Christmas,⁹⁰ but there is no record of an appearance by Iain in 1552 or 1553. In that latter year however, he made amends with his earlier adversary, the earl of Huntly.

On 26 August 1553, Huntly wrote to Mary of Guise, noting that he had 'appontit the ferd day off this nyxt moneytht to spek the nort Illis men in Badzenaycht gyf thai wyll cum'.⁹¹ On 11 September 1553, Iain Muideartach made a contract with Huntly at Ruthven in Badenoch, in which the Clanranald were

...hartlie forgiffing all offensis, wrangis, and disobediens down in tymes bypast to the said erll, or one of his...and speciell the last offens and brak maid be thaim, thair freindis, alis, and part takkaris, upon his gud friend the lord Louett...⁹²

Iain agreed that he and his son Ailean would 'keype guid reqill within thair bondis', but more important was their pledge to be 'trew seruandis to the said erll'. In that capacity, Iain swore to capture Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat and 'all udir capitens and chiftenis within the north illis, to pas to the Quenis grace'. Completion of this task would have

⁸⁸ *AT*, IV, 212.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁹⁰ *RPC*, Vol. I, 126.

⁹¹ *The Scottish Correspondence of Mary of Lorraine*, ed. Annie I. Cameron (Edinburgh, 1927), 366-7.

⁹² *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 222-3.

helped Huntly to maintain ‘gud rewill...within the ilis pertening [his] luftenentrye [lieutenancy]’.⁹³ Iain Muideartach was now technically a government agent, which further divided the loose Clan Donald alliance that, even after Dòmhnall Dubh’s death, threatened to unite behind a new figurehead. If however the Clanranald chief hoped that this contract with Huntly would deflect the attentions of the government away from his clan, he was mistaken.⁹⁴

Upon taking personal control of government in April 1554, Mary of Guise decided that these diplomatic measures were insufficient and ordered the earls of Argyll and Huntly to lead a coordinated assault on the Clanranald and the MacLeods of Lewis. Argyll was to attack through the sea lanes of the west coast while Huntly marched overland, with the two forces forming a pincer movement to entrap their targets. In July, Guise provided Argyll with an artillery piece and ammunition from Dumbarton, which was to be loaded onto a ship stationed in Ayr.⁹⁵ In a letter to Guise, Argyll outlined his plans to depart from Dunstaffnage Castle on 12 August to convene with Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig and Eachann MacLean of Duart on Mull,⁹⁶ at which point they would ‘tak purpose to pas forthwarttis upoun the saidis rebellis’.⁹⁷ Despite extensive preparation, this grand campaign soon crumbled when Huntly was forced to abandon his mutinous army. According to Lesley, the Lowland contingent in Huntly’s army refused to march into the Highlands unless ‘they mycht travel on hors, as they culd on no wayis do in that boundis’.⁹⁸ With their departure, tensions immediately ran high within Huntly’s army, now largely composed of members of the Clan Chattan who held the earl in contempt for his execution of Uilleam Mackintosh, their captain.⁹⁹ Huntly’s excuses seem somewhat convenient and betray a lack of enthusiasm for the campaign. Strong-armed into pursuing the Clanranald, Huntly’s passive approach may have been a circuitous way of honouring his contract with Iain Muideartach, arranged just the year before in 1553. In October 1554, the Queen

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ It is not clear which party first approached the other, although this new arrangement was arguably of mutual benefit to both the Clanranald and Huntly.

⁹⁵ *High Treasurer*, Vol. X, 229. It is significant that Argyll was supplied with an artillery piece, as it may suggest that he did not personally own such equipment. Artillery was loaned to Huntly in 1506 for his protracted state-sanctioned siege of Stornoway. Argyll nevertheless appears to have retained use of the cannon, as shown in his treaty with Ó Domhnaill in 1555, and his offer to loan his ‘pece’ to the earl of Arran in 1560. See Norman Macdougall, *James IV* (East Linton, 1997), 188-9; J. MacKechnie, ‘Treaty between Argyll and O’Donnell’, *SGS*, 7 (1951-3), 100-1; *AFM* 5, M1555.5; *CSPS*, Vol. I, 480.

⁹⁶ Again this was dividing clans that had previously convened under the banner of Dòmhnall Dubh.

⁹⁷ *Mary of Lorraine*, 388.

⁹⁸ Lesley, *History*, 251.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Regent declared that he ‘had not used his commission according to his acceptation and dewtie’ and imprisoned him until March 1555.¹⁰⁰

Argyll’s movements in 1554 are unclear. Following Huntly’s withdrawal, Argyll probably postponed his own campaign, before reconvening the following summer. However, on 1 June 1555, Eòghann ‘McKnok’ was paid for the ‘keeping of the castell of Strone takin be the Erle of Argile furtht of the rebellis handis’.¹⁰¹ This report comes almost one month before Argyll was granted a new commission on 27 June 1555, along with Huntly’s replacement, the earl of Atholl, which may suggest that he had persevered alone in 1554.¹⁰² Castle Strome was the ancestral seat of the MacDonalDs of Glengarry, a cadet of the Clanranald,¹⁰³ so the primary target of the campaign, Iain Muideartach, had eluded Argyll’s grasp. While the capture of Strome seems a token gesture, Argyll may have been attempting to isolate Iain Muideartach from potential allies and deny him a source of refuge. Alternatively, when his endorsement of Iain Muideartach in 1552 is considered,¹⁰⁴ Argyll may have been emulating his counterpart Huntly by shielding the Clanranald from the long arm of the government.

Dawson has claimed that Argyll successfully captured Castle Tioram in 1555 and presents a rather fanciful picture of artillery battering the castle walls while Argyll’s infantry led an amphibious assault.¹⁰⁵ Evidence for this is very limited. Iain was not apprehended by Argyll in 1555,¹⁰⁶ and it is unlikely that Castle Tioram was reduced, although it may have endured a bombardment from Argyll’s artillery.¹⁰⁷ According to John Lesley, it required the ‘wisdom, policie and guid convoy’ of the earl of Atholl to convince the Clanranald chief to make an appearance before the Queen Regent.¹⁰⁸ Argyll seemed unable – or unwilling – to capture the Clanranald chief himself. Guise allegedly pardoned Iain and his kinsmen, but asked the Clanranald men to stay at Methven Castle in Perth, where they were ‘weill treated’. According to Lesley, Iain and his kin soon broke ward and returned to Moidart to incite ‘new troble’.¹⁰⁹ Recently, Ritchie has followed Lesley’s view

¹⁰⁰ *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 13.

¹⁰¹ *High Treasurer*, Vol. X, 281.

¹⁰² *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 14; Mackenzie, *Outer Hebrides*, 147.

¹⁰³ Cathcart, *Kinship*, 139.

¹⁰⁴ *RPC*, Vol. I, 126.

¹⁰⁵ Dawson, ‘Gaelic Lordship’, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Lesley, *History*, 253-4.

¹⁰⁷ In 1888, pieces of cannon ball were found embedded in the curtain wall of the castle, which Tranter dates to the 1554/5 campaign. See Nigel Tranter, *The Fortified House*, Vol. 5 (Edinburgh & London, 1970), 116; Dawson, ‘Gaelic Lordship’, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Lesley, *History*, 253-4. Atholl seems to have met with Iain Muideartach by 28 July 1555. See *High Treasurer*, Vol. X, 285.

¹⁰⁹ Lesley, *History*, 253-4.

of the escape by stating that they returned to the Highlands to ‘resume their insurgent activity’,¹¹⁰ but the Clanranald may just have been hoping to be left alone.

Argyll was more successful in his pursuit of the other main target of the campaign, the MacLeods of Lewis. A later source, written between 1598 and 1613, claims that

The house of Stornowa in the Lewis is fallin, albeit it had biddin the canon be the Erle of Argyle of auld, and be the Gentilmen Ventourares of lait.¹¹¹

In June 1555, Argyll acted as cautioner for Ruairidh, the MacLeod chief, in his submission to the regent.¹¹² The walls of Stornoway Castle were not completely demolished by Argyll’s artillery barrage, but the cannon fire was apparently enough to force MacLeod to capitulate. Many of the castles on the west coast were strategically located to thwart overland attacks, but the merging of cannon with ship created a mobile gun platform that could bombard strongholds from the sea with impunity.

The Clanranald had again managed to avoid, or escape, the clutches of punitive government expeditions. Ten years after the crisis of *Blàr nan Lèine*, Iain Muideartach’s chiefship remained secure. He held his lands by the sword in defiance of continued opposition from the government and Ragnall Gallda’s progeny: on 28 January 1562/3, the lands of Moidart, Arisaig, and the isle of Eigg were granted to Ragnall Gallda’s son, Ailean.¹¹³ Iain’s leadership nevertheless held firm, and in March 1565/6, he received a remission for his previous crimes from the government.¹¹⁴ One of the last incidents Iain presided over as chief was a feud between his clan and the MacLeods of Harris, which had its roots back in the summer of 1544.

The Clanranald and the MacLeods of Harris had a history of strained relations, which may be traced as far back as the fifteenth century. At a feast held by the Lord of the Isles, the Clanranald tutor insulted MacLeod of Harris’ lineage, which MacLeod avenged by raiding Moidart. According to Hugh MacDonald, the Sleat *seanchaidh*, the two clans were ‘never [again] intimate or in good terms’.¹¹⁵ The feud in question may have been influenced by this chequered past, but it was more immediately concerned with land. In 1574, Regent Morton granted the escheat of Glenelg in the lordship of Lochaber to the

¹¹⁰ Ritchie, *Mary of Guise*, 166.

¹¹¹ *RPC*, Vol. X, 821.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV, 14.

¹¹³ *RSS*, Vol. V, Part 1, 322.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 590; Part 2, 60.

¹¹⁵ *HP*, Vol. I, 45-6.

Clanranald. At that time, Morton and Cailean, the sixth earl of Argyll, were locked in a heated political dispute over the ‘retaining’ of the Crown Jewels by Argyll’s wife, Annas Keith,¹¹⁶ and the Campbell chief claimed that Morton made the grant to the Clanranald to stir up trouble for him in the Western Isles, evoking Regent Arran’s tactics in 1543. According to Argyll, the Clanranald were ‘commond murtheris and oppresoris’ and used their escheat to harry Glenelg ‘nocht sparing the cruell slauchter of man wyiff and bairne’.¹¹⁷

Glenelg was a longstanding possession of the MacLeods of Harris, but one-third of the lands had been contested by the Clan Fraser since at least 1527.¹¹⁸ This dispute was temporarily settled by the marriage of Agnes Fraser to Uilleam MacLeod in April 1540, with the Frasers resigning their claim to the lands,¹¹⁹ but the dispute was revived when Uilleam died in 1551, leaving Màiri, the only child born of this union, as sole heiress of the MacLeod estates.¹²⁰ The internecine strife that ensued within the MacLeods left them exposed to the expansionist desires of predatory rivals.¹²¹ Nor did it help that Uilleam’s instrument of sasine for the lands of Glenelg had gone missing from the MacLeods’ charter chest after his death.¹²²

In the aftermath of *Blàr nan Lèine*, at some point between 1544 and 1559,¹²³ perhaps after Uilleam’s death in 1551, it seems that the Clanranald began a hostile occupation of Glenelg to disenfranchise the defeated Frasers. Although this was initially done at the expense of the Frasers, it eventually embroiled the MacLeods who still sought to regain full control of these lands. Members of the Clanranald certainly resided in Glenelg during the chiefship of Uilleam’s successor and younger brother Tormod MacLeod,¹²⁴ and perhaps even earlier during upheaval after Uilleam’s death in 1551.¹²⁵ Eventually, the Clanranald in Glenelg became tenants of the Frasers, who essentially made the best of a bad situation by formalising an arrangement that had been imposed upon

¹¹⁶ George R. Hewitt, *Scotland Under Morton* (Edinburgh, 1982), 41-2; Campbell of Airds, *Clan Campbell*, Vol. II, 79-80.

¹¹⁷ *AT*, V, 224.

¹¹⁸ *Dunvegan Bk*, 66-8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 51-2.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67, 90-1.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 90-8; *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, 136-151; *RMS*, Vol. IV, 547-8.

¹²² *Dunvegan Bk*, 66-7, 72-5.

¹²³ In 1559, Cailean, the earl of Argyll, made a bond with Tormod MacLeod, pledging to help him reclaim Glenelg from the Frasers. The Clanranald incursions may have begun as early as 1546 when Uilleam MacLeod made a bond of manrent with Argyll on 12 April, but in this bond neither the Clanranald nor the Frasers are mentioned specifically as opponents. See *Dunvegan Bk*, 43-4, 72-5; *AT*, IV, 173.

¹²⁴ *Dunvegan Bk*, 72.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-8; *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, 136-151; *RMS*, Vol. IV, 547-8.

them.¹²⁶ A letter from April 1596 by Ailean mac Ragnall of ‘Ester Lagyissets’ aimed at preparing the current MacLeod chief Ruairidh Mòr for an impending court case with the Fraser chief to settle the ownership of Glenelg implies that the Clanranald had used this tenancy arrangement to justify their ‘herschipe’ of Glenelg:

...ye Clanranald alledgit ye Lord Lowett to be yair Warrant [protector] for committing of ye same.¹²⁷

On 18 February 1571/2, the non-entry payments of the lands of Glenelg were granted to Ùisdean Fraser of Lovat,¹²⁸ but in 1573, Màiri MacLeod transferred her claim as heiress of the clan’s estates to Tormod.¹²⁹ It seems plausible that in 1573 or 1574 Tormod then attempted to gain full control of Glenelg, perhaps expelling Clanranald tenants, before the subsequent grant to the Clanranald in 1574 by Morton.¹³⁰ The harrying of Glenelg in 1574 by the Clanranald was not therefore a random attack, but an attempt to underline their possession of these lands, first obtained through *còir a’ chlaidhimh* (‘sword right’) and then sanctified by law.

Around two years after the feud’s outbreak, on 14 September 1576, a bond of manrent was made between the earl of Argyll, and Iain Muideartach, the venerable captain of Clanranald. In this bond, Iain and his son Ailean agreed to

...demit the lands of Glenelg in favour of Tormoud McCloyd, bind themselvis to join with the McLanes and to refer all matters regarding all slaughters and hairscheepis debates betwixt the said McCloyd of Harra to the said Earl, the Earl is held bound to maintain and defend the said Iain and Allan, and others, and to do diligence on McCloyd of Harra.¹³¹

A provision was put in place that if the Clanranald failed to abide by this bond Lachlann MacLean of Duart would ‘pursue and invade’ their lands.¹³² In the eyes of the crown, the lands of Glenelg still officially belonged to the Frasers, as shown by a gift to Tòmas Fraser, the Tutor of Lovat,¹³³ on 16 February 1577.¹³⁴ The Clanranald’s tenancy had presumably

¹²⁶ *Dunvegan Bk*, 72.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 72.

¹²⁸ *RSS*, Vol. VI, 286; *RMS*, Vol. IV, 814.

¹²⁹ *Dunvegan Bk*, 93-4.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 43-4, 72-5, 93-96.

¹³¹ *AT*, VII, 19.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Tòmas was the brother of Ùisdean, son of Alasdair, son of Ùisdean (d. 1544). See *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 183.

¹³⁴ *RSS*, Vol. VII, 131-2.

continued, but the MacLeods refused to recognise the legitimacy of this arrangement and portrayed it as an unlawful occupation.

On 11 July 1577, a contract was made between Tormod MacLeod of Harris and Ailean, the son of Iain Muideartach, and the new captain of Clanranald. This may suggest that Iain had died at some point between September 1576 and 11 July 1577, but his death is not specified in the contract, and he may have only relinquished control of clan affairs to his son, Ailean.¹³⁵ In the contract, Argyll and Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart acted as guarantors as Tormod and Ailean agreed to cease hostilities consisting of

...debaitis, contraverseis, slaughtaris, hairschippis and all uthir injuries commitit and done be alther of thame agains utheris preceeding the dait heiroff...¹³⁶

The contract singles out the Clanranald as the main aggressors, who are ordered to renounce their claim to Glenelg and stop harrying the lands. Later that year, on 1 November, Argyll was to judge this case at Inveraray. The two parties were meanwhile to continue to ‘stand amicable...in gude concorde and nyctbourhed’ according to the terms outlined in the earlier bond of manrent made in 1576.¹³⁷ It seems the intervening nine-month period between September 1576 and July 1577 had been peaceful.¹³⁸

Further analysis of the 1577 contract between MacLeod and the captain of Clanranald reveals another dimension to this quarrel. It states that Ailean’s son, Ailean Òg, and Ailean’s brother, Aonghas, had both committed ‘offensis and injuries’ against their own friends and kin ‘in support of the said Tormoid’, Ailean Òg’s grandfather.¹³⁹ What began as a wrangle over land between separate clans had spiralled into a family feud within the Clanranald, internal strife instigated or inflamed by the MacLeods. According to the ‘Red Book’, Ailean’s chiefship was a period of calm and tranquillity, defined by his ‘good family’ and many male offspring.¹⁴⁰ The above contract presents a markedly different picture of a chief under threat from the ambitions of his closest male relatives. Despite excising this discord, the ‘Red Book’ implicitly provides a possible explanation for

¹³⁵ The ‘Red Book’ records Iain’s death at 1574, so he probably did die around this time. See *Reliquiae Celticae*, 170-1.

¹³⁶ *AT*, VII, 26.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ This feud is notable for coinciding with the infamous massacre of Eigg, in which 400 members of the Clanranald were allegedly suffocated in a cave by MacLeod raiders. However, the evidence for such an event is limited, and the documents discussed here do not mention any incident on the island. See Crawford, ‘Massacre of Eigg’.

¹³⁹ *AT*, VII, 26.

¹⁴⁰ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 171-3.

the rift in familial relations. The mother of Ailean's first born son, Ailean Òg, was the daughter of MacLeod of Harris, yet 'after her he took unto him the daughter of Maclean of Duart', and had a 'good family' by her, including a son, Iain of Strome.¹⁴¹ The wording of 'after her' is ambiguous. While it could suggest she had died, MacDonald & MacDonald have plausibly argued that Ailean spurned MacLeod's daughter while she still lived.¹⁴² We cannot know for certain if Ailean did indeed reject his current wife in favour of the daughter of Eachann Òg MacLean of Duart, but regardless his new marriage threatened the inheritance of his first-born son, Ailean Òg. After succeeding his father Iain as chief between September 1576 and July 1577, Ailean may have sought to sever his marital link with the MacLeods, with whom his clan's relations seem strained at best, and politically realign with the Campbell/MacLean powerhouse. Upon his succession, he seems to have named his son Dòmhnall, born of his second marriage to MacLean's daughter, as his heir, supplanting his first-born son, Ailean Òg. This was a serious insult to the MacLeods and would have undoubtedly exacerbated his dispute with them, while providing clear justification for Ailean Òg to turn against his father and Clanranald kin. With help or encouragement from Tormod, Ailean Òg's grandfather, this had all the makings of an attempted coup.

The 1577 contract and judicial hearing at Inveraray that presumably followed appear to have resolved the dispute between the MacLeods and the Clanranald, and healed the internal rift within the latter clan. Ailean's son and newly named heir, Dòmhnall, was sent to the earl of Argyll as a pledge for the future good behaviour of the clan, and he eventually succeeded his father as captain of the Clanranald.¹⁴³ Meanwhile, Ailean Òg and Aonghas pledged to keep the peace, with Tormod MacLeod acting as their pledge.¹⁴⁴ It was not until 4 February 1579 that Tormod was officially invested by the crown in the lands held by his niece Màiri since 1551,¹⁴⁵ and even then, the contest over Glenelg continued for many more years. According to the *Chronicles of the Frasers* several Fraser leaders mounted armed expeditions to Glenelg in the sixteenth century to settle 'the interest there'.¹⁴⁶ In 1589, Tòmas Fraser 'went personally...with a 100 bowmen' to arrange a seven-year lease of the land and assure the inhabitants of his protection.¹⁴⁷ Travelling

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 173. This marriage is confirmed by the 1576 contract, which states Ailean's son Dòmhnall was 'gottin upone Janait MakClayne'. See *AT*, VII, 19.

¹⁴² MacDonald & MacDonald, *Clan Donald*, Vol. II, 293.

¹⁴³ *AT*, VII, 19; *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 173.

¹⁴⁴ *AT*, VII, 26.

¹⁴⁵ *RMS*, Vol. IV, 814; *RSS*, Vol. VII, 366.

¹⁴⁶ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 128, 130-1, 147-8, 179, 184.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

with a sizeable entourage was a sensible precaution for any chief, especially after the Frasers' defeat in 1544, but an armed escort nevertheless suggests that Glenelg was potentially hostile territory.

Members of the Clanranald continued to reside in Glenelg as late as 1610, when Lord Lovat pledged to provide them with land of equal value should he be evicted.¹⁴⁸ There is however no further evidence for any violence in Glenelg, perhaps indicating that they were peacefully sharing the same territory. In 1611, the dispute was finally resolved in the MacLeods' favour, when all the lands of Glenelg were judged to belong to them providing they pay the Clan Fraser 12,000 merks.¹⁴⁹ Then in 1613, Ruairidh Mòr's 'lauchfull dochtir' Moir married Iain, son of Dòmhnall, the Clanranald chief. The lands of Glenelg were not mentioned in the marriage contract, but this union was presumably intended to create new, positive bonds of kinship between the two clans following this long dispute.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

Overall, the Clanranald were at the epicentre of several important incidents in the mid-to-late sixteenth century, and the chiefship of Iain Muideartach was certainly a 'troubled time'.¹⁵¹ The interference of the Frasers and possibly Huntly in the succession of the Clanranald was catalytic to violence, and leadership contests are a recurrent theme throughout this period. *Blàr nan Lèine* shows that chiefs were willing to use military action to protect and secure their own position. Decisive pitched battles were relatively rare in the West Highland and Isles in this period, and in fact, the battle at Loch Lochy in 1544 may be the largest clan engagement of the sixteenth century.¹⁵² The impact of the battle was felt across the western seaboard, the reverberations creating long-lasting consequences. Not only was the Clan Fraser crippled as a political and military force, but the aftershocks of the battle eventually led to conflict between the Clanranald and the MacLeods of Harris, and initiated a power-struggle within the Camerons, as discussed in Chapter 8. Descendants of Ragnall Gallda meanwhile continued to challenge for the chiefship of the Clanranald as late as 1610.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ *Dunvegan Bk*, 68, 75.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 68, 216.

¹⁵⁰ *Dunvegan Bk*, 52-3. For a poem possibly composed for this wedding, see *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 64-7.

¹⁵¹ *Reliquiae Celticae*, Vol. II, 170-1.

¹⁵² MacGregor, 'Warfare', 215. *Blàr Traigh Ghruinneart* between the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the MacLeans of Duart in 1598 also vies for that title.

¹⁵³ *Supra*: 70 n.66.

Argyll's campaign in 1554 and 1555 exemplifies both the strength and limitations of government expeditions. Argyll succeeded in capturing the castles of Strome and Stornoway, but other strongholds like Castle Tioram could still prove difficult to capture even with gunpowder. Moreover, the efficacy of delegation by the crown was dependent upon the willingness of the noble to carry out their commissions, and there is evidence to suggest that Huntly and Argyll were somewhat reluctant to break their friendly terms with the Clanranald. Although quick to resort to punitive measures, Mary of Guise and Regent Arran apparently understood that a royal presence in the Highlands and Isles could strengthen the crown's grip on the region. In 1552 and again in 1556, Guise conducted a 'progress' in the Highlands in emulation of her husband,¹⁵⁴ a highly visible approach that was not continued by James VI, whose planned expeditions to the Highlands and Isles never came to fruition. Despite these efforts, there was considerable room for improvement where the Western Isles were concerned, as on both expeditions Guise did not visit the Hebrides, and generally stayed to the east of the Great Glen.¹⁵⁵

The violence between the Clanranald and the MacLeods of Harris over the lands of Glenelg is more small-scale than the other situations discussed in this case study, but is equally instructive, allowing fuller comprehension of the long-term effects of a battle like *Blàr nan Lèine*. The Clanranald's tenancy in Glenelg may have begun through hostile occupation of these lands, but it eventually evolved into a mutually beneficial arrangement with the Frasers. Considering the devastation wrought at Loch Lochy in 1544, a peaceful tenancy agreement between these clans less than a decade later seems almost unthinkable. Although their relationship was probably not entirely amicable or indeed equal in terms of a balance of power, this nevertheless highlights that feuds were not necessarily interminable, and clans could find areas of commonality even after serious bloodshed. This conflict also demonstrates that multiple marriages could cause serious upheaval within the internal hierarchy of a clan, as the Clanranald faced its second succession crisis in 30 years. Clear parallels can be drawn with the situation in 1544, with Ailean Òg supported by his mother's clan the MacLeods, just as Ragnall Gallda had the support of the Frasers. Violence was again triggered, and although the exact nature of this violence is harder to pinpoint, it seems much smaller in scale than in 1544. The main difference between the two situations is the more active judicial role played by the earl of Argyll. Further conflict between and within the two clans was apparently averted without the need for government

¹⁵⁴ Lesley, *History*, 243, 256-7; Ritchie, *Mary of Guise*, 162-3, 166-7; Cameron, *James V*, 228-54.

¹⁵⁵ According to Lesley, in both 1552 and 1556 Guise visited Inverness, Elgin, Banff, and Aberdeen. In 1552 she stopped off in Dundee and Perth, and more significantly, in 1556 she visited Ross. See Lesley, *History*, 243, 256-7.

intervention, which speaks volumes about the efficacy of reconciliation processes in the Highlands and Isles when led by an able magnate, like the sixth earl of Argyll.

Chapter 6: The Colquhouns of Luss and the Lennox, 1586-1608

This case study will focus on politics and warfare in the Lennox from 1586 to 1608 primarily through the lens of the Colquhouns, a clan at the epicentre of two crucial events in the period: the murder of their chief Sir Umfra (Humphrey) Colquhoun of Luss by the MacFarlanes in 1592, and their heavy defeat by the MacGregors at the battle of Glen Fruin in 1603. The first section will deal with the short but eventful chiefship of Sir Umfra Colquhoun of Luss from 1586 until 1592. During this period, a complex and volatile political situation had developed within the Lennox and the Colquhouns were not passive victims of MacFarlane aggression. The second section will analyse the aftermath of Sir Umfra's death, including the continuing feud with the MacFarlanes and the circumstances leading to the battle of Glen Fruin in 1603. The latter conflict was a crushing defeat for the Colquhouns, but in the long term it was even more pivotal for the MacGregors. Facing the full wrath of royal government, they were outlawed and the very name of MacGregor was proscribed.¹ As in other case studies, the machinations of prominent magnates, including the earl of Argyll, may have precipitated conflict – possibly in 1592 and almost certainly in 1603 – and exploring this theme will demonstrate that these individuals could seriously destabilise the locality. In military terms, this case study covers a large spectrum of clan warfare in the Highlands encompassing transitory cattle raids, the assassination of a clan chief, and a full-scale pitched-battle. Examining a region like the Lennox, which has been generally neglected by scholarship, broadens our knowledge of the prevalence and extent of warfare in the Highlands of Scotland as a whole.

From at least the middle of the fifteenth century, the Colquhouns held the barony of Luss, which included the settlement of Luss itself, the lands of Colquhoun and Garscube in the shire of Dumbarton, Sauchie and Colquhoun's Glen in the shire of Stirling, and the mill lands of Saline in the shire of Fife.² Their main seat was the 'castell, toure and fortalice' of Rossdhu,³ which lay to the south of Luss on the west bank of Loch Lomond, overlooking the cluster of islands including Inchmurrin. Their political opponents in the later sixteenth century, the MacFarlanes, were based in Arrochar on the shores of Loch Long to the north

¹ *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 400-2, 402, n. 1.

² *RMS*, Vol. II, 413, 510; *Cartulary of Colquhoun of Colquhoun and Luss*, ed. William Fraser (Edinburgh, 1873), 3-4; *RSS*, Vol. II, 403, 618. They also had 'fischeingis and weirs in the watter of Clyde'. See *RSS*, Vol. II, 618; Vol. III, 372.

³ *RSS*, Vol. II, 618; *Cartulary*, 5-7, 22.

of the Colquhouns' powerbase,⁴ and other important clans, such as the Galbraiths and the Buchanans, could be found to the east of Loch Lomond.⁵ When the Stewarts inherited the earldom of Lennox in 1488, many successive earls were absentee lords, allowing the Campbell earls of Argyll to exert increasing influence on the Lennox from the late fifteenth century.⁶ Argyll had a firm hold between 1532 and 1564, and maintained dependents, including the Colquhouns, in the region even after the earldom was held by the more active earls Matthew Stewart (d. 1571) and Esmé Stewart (d. 1583).⁷

Although a Highland and Gaelic clan, the Colquhouns may have been considered by central government as amenable to its agenda in a way most other clans were not, perhaps in the mould of the Campbell earls of Argyll or latterly the MacKenzies of Kintail.⁸ This view of the Colquhouns derives from the long history of their chiefs acting as representatives of royal government in the Lennox, stretching back at least to Iain (d. 1439). His grandson Iain (d. 1478) was a member of parliament and the sheriff of Dumbarton, and his grandson Iain (d. 1536) was a Lord of the Privy Council.⁹ Both were knighted, as were Iain (d. 1574) and Umfra (d.1592).¹⁰ Favoured by the crown far more than neighbouring clans such as the MacFarlanes, the Colquhouns perhaps represented the acceptable face of southern Gaeldom, an image of distinctive civility the clan itself may have actively cultivated.

By the end of the sixteenth century therefore, the Colquhouns had long been established as reliable crown agents, a trend that continued in Sir Umfra's chiefship. His father Iain died in 1574 while Umfra was still a minor, leaving his uncle Seumas

⁴ The MacFarlanes had close links to the MacGregors, and throughout the Campbell-MacGregor feud in the 1560s and early 1570s the MacFarlanes aided and reset members of the Clan Gregor. See *Campbell Letters*, 43, 54, 199, 206.

⁵ RSS, Vol. I, 548; Michael Brown, 'Earldom and kindred: the Lennox and its earls, 1200-1458', *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland*, eds Steve Boardman & Alasdair Ross (Dublin, 2003), 202, n. 2.

⁶ MacGregor, 'Political History', 81; Brown, 'Earldom and kindred', 223-4. While the Lennox was not within the dominion of the Lordship of the Isles, it still would have felt the aftershocks of the forfeiture in 1493 as the Campbell earls of Argyll in particular expanded into the power vacuums that were created. The situation in the Lennox in the mid-fifteenth century was yet another opportunity for Campbell expansion.

⁷ MacGregor, 'Political History', 67, 81, 84, 255-6, 301. In 1545, Argyll's sphere of influence embraced areas of the Lennox, including the barony of Glen Fruin and Rosneath, and the lands of Inchmurrin in Loch Lomond. In 1547, Iain Colquhoun of Luss held lands in the Lennox from Argyll. See *AT*, IV, 163, 188-9.

⁸ Having gained their estates in the later thirteenth century and in doing so displaced 'native' kindreds, the Colquhouns were capable of being perceived as 'incomers' and perhaps outsiders. See Cynthia J. Neville, *Native Lordship in Medieval Scotland: The Earldoms of Strathearn and Lennox, c. 1140-1365* (Dublin, 2005), 73, 75, 224; Brown, 'Earldom and kindred', 210.

⁹ Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol.I, xv-xvii.

¹⁰ *Cartulary*, 9, 12.

Colquhoun of Garscube to act as the Tutor of Luss until Umfra came of age in 1586.¹¹ In June 1577, Umfra was given an annual rent of £40 from the lands of ‘Goldenhuff’ in the shire of Stirling, and in 1582 he was named the coroner of the shire of Dumbarton.¹² By February 1587, Umfra had received a knighthood,¹³ and he was recorded as one of the baillies of Dumbarton in 1588.¹⁴ In the following year, Sir Umfra was included among the cream of the Lowland nobility in the list of ‘Nobles of Scotland well affected to England’.¹⁵ Just one year younger than King James VI himself, Sir Umfra seems to have been earmarked as a rising star of the Scottish nobility.

Despite these royal endorsements, his chiefship was relatively troubled from the beginning. One of his first acts as clan chief was to revoke all tacks and contracts granted during his minority by his tutor, which had been to ‘his hurt and damage’.¹⁶ This may suggest some tension between Umfra and his uncle Seumas, with the young chief determined to take matters into his own hands. He inherited a legal dispute with the Galbraiths of Culcreuch over the lands of Kilbride in Glen Fruin,¹⁷ probably aggravated by the above revocation.¹⁸ Financial problems also blighted the young chief, as, according to Fraser, he failed to pay his part of the taxation of £40,000 granted by the nobles of Scotland to King James VI.¹⁹ As a result, on 23 November 1588, Sir Umfra was put to the horn and stripped of his lands, which were escheated to Robert Chirnsyde of Over Possil, a Glasgow baillie.²⁰ In January 1591, Chirnsyde bestowed the whole ‘lands and heritages’ of Luss on Sir Umfra’s brother, Alasdair, having received ‘certane gratitudes, gude deidis, and pleasouris’ from him.²¹ On 1 June of that year, Sir Umfra was again declared an outlaw at the behest of Chirnsyde.²² These issues were only compounded by flashes of violence by

¹¹ *Cartulary*, 7, 9; GCA: T-CL, Bundle LVII, no. 59, no. 64. He was married to Jean Cunningham in May 1583, but in 1586, he is described as ‘now approaching his majority’. Fraser claims he was 21 in November 1586. See GCA: T-CL, Bundle LVII, no. 37; *Cartulary*, 252-3; Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 140.

¹² *Cartulary*, 403, 370-1. Originally the office of ‘coronator’ belonged exclusively to the earls of Lennox, but was subsequently transmitted through several families in the Lennox. The Colquhouns’ investment in the title may have had some symbolic meaning. See *Cartularium Comitatus de Levenax*, xv.

¹³ *RPC*, Vol. IV, 148.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 300-1. George Buchanan and James Galbraith of Culcreuch were also named as baillies. Those mentioned were deemed true upholders of the Protestant faith – few other Highland chiefs were given this title.

¹⁵ *CSPS*, Vol. X, 151-2. The list included John Maitland, the Lord Chancellor, the earl of Arran, the earl of Glencairn, the earl of Cassilis, the earl of Mar, the earl of Morton, the earl of Angus, Lord Drummond, Lord Ross, Lord Somerville, Lord Fleming, Lord Forbes, Lord Lamenton, Lord Evindall, Lord Carfin, and various others.

¹⁶ GCA: T-CL, Bundle LVII, no. 37; *Cartulary*, 257.

¹⁷ NGR: NS 3069 8661.

¹⁸ *Cartulary*, 257-261. He rescinded the lease of Adam Colquhoun’s £6 land in Kilbride. See *Cartulary*, 260.

¹⁹ Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 149.

²⁰ *Cartulary*, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 149.

²² GCA: T-CL, Bundle LXV, no. 7; *Cartulary*, 304-5.

Sir Umfra, which saw him implicated in the murder of William Brisbane of Barnishill,²³ and, as we shall see, the killing of a MacFarlane. For these accumulated crimes, the Colquhoun chief had squandered much of his royal favour, becoming ‘obnoxious’ to central government.²⁴ In a remarkably short space of time, Sir Umfra had alienated most neighbouring families, central government, and perhaps even his own clan, and was reduced to the status of a dispossessed outlaw by June 1591.

At the outset of Sir Umfra’s chiefship, the Colquhouns seem quite closely associated with the Campbell earls of Argyll.²⁵ Sir Umfra’s first wife was Jean (Janet) Cunningham, the widow of Gilleasbuig, the fifth earl of Argyll (d. 1573),²⁶ and on 30 October 1590, Gilleasbuig, the seventh earl (d. 1638) gave Colquhoun a charter for the lands of Bordland of Saline as thanks for his ‘faithful service’ and homage.²⁷ Political outrage followed two years later when George Gordon, the sixth earl of Huntly, assassinated James Stewart, the ‘Bonnie’ earl of Moray, in February 1592. One month after the murder, on 16 March 1592, Sir Umfra Colquhoun shifted allegiance away from Argyll by pledging his service to Huntly, promising to ‘becum [his] man servand and dependar’ and to assist him in any ‘deidlie feidis, by past, present, and to cum’.²⁸ This is a decisive break from Colquhoun’s previous association with Argyll, and the switch could not have come at a more politically volatile time. Anticipating retribution for the murder of Moray, Huntly was desperately looking for allies,²⁹ and soon he was militarily pursued by the earl of Argyll with the support of the royal government, a campaign that eventually culminated in the battle of Glenlivet in 1594.³⁰ Considering his own troubles with the law, Sir Umfra was probably equally keen for the alliance, but this came at the cost of attracting the enmity of Argyll. The MacFarlanes were close adherents of the earl of Argyll,³¹ and

²³ Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 169. Probably Barnishill in Galloway, west of Dumfries. See NGR: NX 66601 76942.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁵ Various Colquhouns are found in the earl of Argyll’s retinue to visit the French court in 1536. See RSS, Vol. II, 320-2, no. 2152.

²⁶ GCA: T-CL, Bundle LVI, no. 1; *Cartulary*, 252-3. Janet died before 6 January 1584-5. See *Scots Peerage*, Vol. I, 343.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 5; *AT*, VII, 207; *Cartulary*, 439.

²⁸ *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 247.

²⁹ As noted by Alison Cathcart, Mackintosh and Grant made a bond to avenge Moray’s murder in February 1592, breaking their allegiance with Huntly. In response, Huntly allied with Ailean Cameron of Lochiel and made a bond with Alasdair MacDonald of Keppoch. See Cathcart, *Kinship*, 195; *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 248.

³⁰ MacCoinnich, ‘Conflict and Identity’, 159.

³¹ Several MacFarlanes (and Colquhouns) were included among Argyll’s ‘kin, freyndis and servandis’ that visited the French court in 1536, and the MacFarlanes are listed as Argyll’s adherents on 14 August 1546. Iain MacFarlane obtained a remission for crimes at Inveraray on 23 July 1563. See RSS, Vol. II, 320-2; Vol. III, 288; Vol. VI, 397.

according to Fraser, they became hatchet men on his behalf, attacking and killing Sir Umfra at his castle of Bannachra³² in 1592.³³

Yet this explanation of factional politics hijacking local rivalries does not wholly explain the shift to open conflict. The Colquhouns and MacFarlanes had already come to blows at least two years prior to Huntly's involvement, with the MacFarlanes conducting several plundering raids on Colquhoun lands from 1589.³⁴ A series of bonds and cautions made between March and April 1591 sought to obtain a ceasefire, but if achieved it was only temporary.³⁵ Hostilities before April 1591 were apparently limited to Colquhoun clan branches and did not include the Colquhoun chief himself. Nevertheless, several prominent families were involved, including the Colquhouns of Garscube, represented by Umfra's old tutor, Seumas. On the other side, various MacFarlanes, including their chief Anndra of Arrochar, were implicated in the raids and associated violence.³⁶

The Colquhouns equally had blood on their hands. An entry in the Privy Council on 15 February 1610 claims that the murder of a MacFarlane by Sir Umfra 'caused' the whole feud, which continued for many years.³⁷ The murdered MacFarlane can be identified as Dòmhnall mac Nèill MacFarlane, the father of Iain MacFarlane of Shemore in Glen Finlas,³⁸ and the household servant of Raibeart Galbraith of Culcreuch.³⁹ Dòmhnall may have been killed at some point after May 1589, as Raibeart Galbraith's father, Seumas, was clan leader until at least 24 May, but Dòmhnall could have been Raibeart's household servant before his father's death.⁴⁰ Definite knowledge of the order of events (i.e. whether the above MacFarlane raids came before the murder of Dòmhnall, or were conducted thereafter in retaliation) is difficult to determine. The murder and its aftermath may help to explain Umfra's sudden shift to Huntly if Argyll and the MacFarlanes were pursuing him. Regardless, the repercussions for the Colquhouns were severe and even 20 years later in 1610 the murder was still regarded as the flashpoint for the entire 'dedlie' feud with the MacFarlanes.

³² The remains of the castle lie just west of Arden. See NGR: NS 34264 84304.

³³ Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol.I, 153-6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-2. (Reprint of original document)

³⁵ *RPC*, Vol. IV, 599, 604, 606-8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 604, 606-8.

³⁷ *RPC*, Vol. VIII, 414-5.

³⁸ *Ibid.* Shemore in Glen Finlas lies west of Rosdhu Castle. See NGR: NS 34562 88441.

³⁹ *RPC*, Vol. V, 74-5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 384-5. Raibeart was confirmed as the Duke of Lennox's deputy sheriff of Dunbarton in March 1597. See *RPC*, Vol. V, 373.

Sir Umfra Colquhoun of Luss was certainly dead by 11 August 1592 when his lands were gifted to Walter Stewart of Blantyre, Keeper of the Privy Seal, by King James VI.⁴¹ The exact circumstances of his death are extremely murky, but crucial to understanding this case study. On 28 April 1607, Sir Umfra's successor Alasdair wrote to King James about his brother's murder at the hands of the MacFarlanes:

I haue beine urgit be the Counsell to submit with the Mcfarlanes my brotheris slauchter and all uther slauchteris, murtheris, hairscheppis, theftis, reiffis and oppressiounis, raising of fyre demolishing of my housis cwithting and destroying of woods and plaining committit be thame against me...⁴²

Other sources muddy the waters and suggest a more complex situation. An anonymous letter written by a noble in Scotland shortly after Sir Umfra's death, paints a lurid picture of disorder and unrest across the entire country:

The estate of our country and court is as changeable as ever it was, with as little obedience or justice; many deadly feuds without punishment; and reif and oppression throughout all the country. The Macfarlanes are worse than the Clan Gregor...Immediately is slain the Laird of Luss by the MacFarlanes in the Lennox, betrayed in the night most shamefully.⁴³

The detail that Sir Umfra was 'betrayed' appears to indicate that an ally or even his own kin were implicated in his death. This is expanded upon by Robert Birrell, a burges of Edinburgh, who kept a diary for over forty years, recording events of both national and regional importance.⁴⁴ According to Birrell, Sir Umfra's brother Iain (John) was responsible for the murder:

The last of Nouember [30 November 1592], Johne Cohoune ves behedit at ye crosse of Edinburghe, for murthering of his awen brother the laird of Lusse.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Cartulary*, 12-3.

⁴² *HP*, Vol. III, 106.

⁴³ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 4-5.

⁴⁴ Birrell was a well-informed individual and a seemingly reliable source. For example, he corroborates the capture of Campbell of Ardkinglas for his murder of Cawdor, records the dates and notable casualties at the battles of Glenlivet and Glen Fruin, and notes the hanging of MacGregor of Glenstrae in October 1603. See 'The Diarey of Robert Birrel, burges of Edinburghe', *Fragments of Scottish History*, ed. John Graham Dalyell (Edinburgh, 1798), 37, 33, 57-8, 60-1 (separately paginated).

⁴⁵ 'Diarey of Robert Birrel', 29.

‘A Brief Account of the Familie of Luse’, a genealogical history for the Colquhouns probably composed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century,⁴⁶ reiterates the involvement of Iain:

This Humphrey had no sons, he was killed by the Mcfarlands at the Bannochra in 1591. His second brother was John who was executed at Edinburgh for being accessory to his brother’s murder.⁴⁷

This shines a new light on this feud, recasting it from a straightforward conflict between two separate clans to a more complex political situation of internal strife and fratricide. It may be reasonably speculated that Sir Umfra was betrayed and assassinated during a parley with the MacFarlanes, possibly at Bannachra Castle. Iain Colquhoun may have sought to usurp his older brother as chief, perhaps with direct support from the MacFarlanes. Yet a stronger possibility is that Iain betrayed Sir Umfra to end a divisive and self-destructive chiefship characterised by violence, financial problems, and politically imprudent alliances. Iain may have supported the MacFarlanes in seeking redress for the killing of Dòmhnall MacFarlane and handed over his brother Sir Umfra to face their private justice, thus clearing the way for a chiefship takeover by his other brother Alasdair, who had been given the clan’s lands in 1591. Unfortunately for Iain, this cost him his life, and the circumstances of his apprehension are unknown. Although the removal of Sir Umfra was beneficial for himself and the clan, it is possible that Alasdair surrendered Iain to crown justice.

A later genealogical history, ‘An Historical & Genealogical Deduction of the Family of Colquhoun of Luss’, probably composed in the early nineteenth century,⁴⁸ conflates Sir Umfra’s death with the battle of Glen Fruin:

He fought the McGregors at the Conflict at Glenfruin & was that day or the next shot thorough [sic] the chink of a cellar window in his own house of Bannachra whether he had retired for shelter in the 1602.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The last chief mentioned by this history is Sir Humphrey (1685/8-1718). See *Cartulary*, 33; Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 302.

⁴⁷ GCA: T-CL Addt., Bundle XLVI.

⁴⁸ The last chief mentioned by this history is Sir James (1786-1805). See *Cartulary*, 47; Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 385.

⁴⁹ GCA: T-CL Addt., Bundle XLVI.

By merging the two events, the later history elides the fratricide and presents Sir Umfra's downfall as the outcome of a more conventional inter-clan feud. The maligned MacGregors are left to carry the sole burden of the murder, while the MacFarlanes, and indeed Iain Colquhoun, evaded culpability. This account may derive from, or be influenced by, local tradition, and this is the earliest textual reference to the 'window' detail, an ever-present feature of later accounts.⁵⁰ Fraser's rendition of Sir Umfra's death has the MacFarlanes, joined by the MacGregors, encircling the castle and conducting a protracted siege, until a servant of Sir Umfra offers to betray his master by throwing 'the glare of a paper torch upon his person, when opposite a loophole'. When Colquhoun's illuminated figure appeared at the window, MacFarlane bowmen shot him in the heart, and the besiegers stormed the castle, brutally attacking the remaining occupants.⁵¹ Oral tradition of this event published by Michael Newton retains much of the same detail, except that Sir Umfra is flushed out by suffocating smoke created by a 'huge heap of brushwood' ignited by the MacFarlanes (the MacGregors playing no part in this version).⁵² It is interesting to note that although the details have been distorted, these two stories still retain aspects of treachery and betrayal as core elements of Sir Umfra's demise, even if they have forgotten or elided Iain Colquhoun's involvement in the murder of his brother.

Considering that Sir Umfra was a chief of some note both north and south of the Firth of Clyde, it may seem surprising that there are no surviving Privy Council entries from the immediate period that record his death. In contrast to this silence, the Colquhouns later employed a highly emotive public display of grief at Edinburgh to secure reparations for their kin murdered by the MacGregors at Glen Finlas in 1602. Calls of justice for Sir Umfra were non-existent, perhaps because he was indeed considered a liability, with the leadership of his brother, Alasdair, preferred by the clan at large. Moreover, the involvement of his other brother Iain in his murder must have encouraged the Colquhouns to limit their remonstrations.

Following the death of Umfra and the execution of Iain, Alasdair became chief of the Colquhouns. As mentioned, Alasdair had been invested in the lands by Robert Chirnsyde of Over Possil in January 1591, but the gift of the barony of Luss by James VI to Walter Stewart in August 1592 overrode this investment and Alasdair was forced to

⁵⁰ Walter Scott, *The Lady of the Lake*, ed. William J. Rolfe (Boston 1883), Canto Second ('The Island'), Stanza XX.

⁵¹ Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 156-7.

⁵² Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid*, 221.

purchase the lands from Stewart for 5,000 merks on 25 January 1593.⁵³ He was formally recognised in the lands by King James in February 1593, and in December he was given custody of Sir Umfra's 'bairne posthume', his daughters Margaret and Agnes.⁵⁴ The feud with the MacFarlanes spilled over into Alasdair's chiefship, and this lasting enmity probably absolves Alasdair of any culpability in the murder of his older brother. In December 1593, Alasdair issued a 'letter of inhibition' against Robert Erskine of Little Sauchie,⁵⁵ prohibiting him from selling any Colquhoun lands to MacFarlane of Arrochar.⁵⁶ Unfortunately for the Colquhouns, this prompted the involvement of crown favourite John Erskine, the earl of Mar, who supported his kinsman, Erskine of Little Sauchie, and by extension, the MacFarlanes. The prevailing Argyll-Huntly rivalry can also be raised as a possible explanation for Mar's involvement. He was a prominent member of the king's court, and while he was not involved directly at Glenlivet,⁵⁷ he supported Argyll in his feud against Huntly.⁵⁸ It is possible that Mar backed Argyll's adherents the MacFarlanes in their dispute with the Colquhouns in an extension of this feud against Huntly.⁵⁹ A letter by the Scottish clergyman and politician John Colville to English diplomat Robert Bowes on 28 June 1595 provides insight into the nature of Mar's involvement. Colville discusses the 'ill-will' between Mar and John Maitland, the Lord Chancellor, caused by the murder of Mar's servant David Forrester, and he muses upon how their feud may proceed:

So I think Mar will first use form of law and then his power, as he did against Luss.⁶⁰

This probably indicates military activity, or the threat of such, by Mar and the MacFarlanes against the Colquhouns, but the precise details are unknown. A letter written on 26 October 1595 by Roger Aston to Robert Bowes notes that Walter Stewart of Blantyre and the earl of Mar have met 'for the agreeing of the deadly feud between the laird of Lawes⁶¹ and the MacFarlanes', suggesting Mar was only involved as an arbitrator.⁶² On 1 November, the

⁵³ *Cartulary*, 13-14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵ Presumably Colquhoun's tenant in Sauchie in Stirlingshire.

⁵⁶ *Cartulary*, 442.

⁵⁷ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 449.

⁵⁸ *RPC*, Vol. VII, 347, 351, 372; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 458.

⁵⁹ Oral tradition has remembered the feud between the Colquhouns and the earl of Mar. An account of the battle of 'Glenfroom' given by Donald MacGregor, schoolmaster near Rossdhu, in 1823, claims Sir Ùmphraidh's death at Bannachra was instigated by a vengeful Lady Mar who employed the MacFarlanes to kill the Colquhoun chief. See NRS: GD50/65.

⁶⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 625.

⁶¹ 'Lawes' has been misidentified as (Campbell of) 'Lawers' by the editor. Luss is later rendered 'Luce'. See *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 52.

⁶² *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 49.

feud is referred to by George Nicolson, writing to Robert Bowes, this time without any mention of Mar:

The matters between the laird of Luce and the MacFarlanes is put to comprement [compromit] by the means of Blantyre.⁶³

A bond of 1 June 1597 temporarily resolved the feud, with the earl of Mar acting as surety that the MacFarlanes would keep the peace with the Colquhouns.⁶⁴ This arrangement was ratified by Alasdair of Luss on 7 November 1599, in a bond that pledged the safety of Anndra MacFarlane of Arrochar, his son Iain, and ‘the remanent of thair surname, kind, freindes, partie and partakares’.⁶⁵ On 31 January 1602, Ludovick Stewart, the Duke of Lennox, pledged to provide the king with 200 men for service in Ireland and nominated the brother of the heir of Colquhoun of Camstradden and the son of Anndra Dubh MacFarlane of Gartavartane⁶⁶ to serve as ‘captains’.⁶⁷

This truce may have brought some years of peace between the two clans, but the Colquhouns became embroiled in another costly feud, this time with the MacGregors. The origins of this feud again seem related to factional politics amongst the high-status nobility, as a rift emerged between the Duke of Lennox and Argyll – a rivalry that had considerable historical precedent.⁶⁸ On 25 November 1600, the Duke initially claimed that his office of Lord High Admiral of Scotland had been usurped by Argyll holding courts in the ‘west parts’ of the realm.⁶⁹ On 9 December, Lennox appeared before the Privy Council, formally accusing Argyll of authorising an attack upon his vassal, MacAulay of Ardencaple.⁷⁰ This prompted little reaction from the councillors and in March 1601, Argyll obtained a commission to pacify the MacGregors, who since at least 1592 had launched numerous cattle raids against various adjacent clans.⁷¹ At Stirling on 22 April, Alasdair Ruadh MacGregor of Glenstrae gave a bond to Argyll for the future good behaviour of his clan.⁷² By December 1601, Lennox was again at odds with Argyll, claiming this commission against the MacGregors had resulted in encroachments upon his lands.⁷³ The ‘malcontent’ between the two nobles only increased in the months that followed, and Lennox began to

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁴ Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol.I, 174-5. (Reprint of original document)

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Now Gartartan, near Gartmore. See NGR: NS 53016 97803

⁶⁷ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 942; *RPC*, Vol. VI, 342-4.

⁶⁸ Brown, ‘Earldom and kindred’, 212; *HP*, Vol. IV, 11-7; *Campbell Letters*, 43, 52-5.

⁶⁹ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 177-8, 668, n.1; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. V, 138-9; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 645

⁷⁰ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 183-4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 213-7, 489.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 402-4.

⁷³ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 915.

believe Argyll coveted his titles of lieutenant of the Isles and Lord High Admiral.⁷⁴ In April 1602, Lennox again accused Argyll of authorising the raid on MacAulay, and a second attack on another of Lennox's vassals, Iain Stewart of Ardmaleish, sheriff of Bute, by Dubhghall Campbell of Auchinbreck was added to the charge.⁷⁵ On 18 May 1602, the king managed to temporarily reconcile the two nobles, with Argyll making assurances for Auchinbreck's future conduct, and it seemed that the dispute would be 'packit up and tane away be a amicable and freindlie dres of freindis'.⁷⁶ For a few months Lennox and Argyll were 'cold friends', but by August 1602 they again stood in 'evil terms'.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, the MacGregors' attacks had continued into 1602, unimpeded by Argyll, including a wide-ranging raid against the Colquhouns on 4 June.⁷⁸ The Colquhouns were granted a commission to resist the Clan Gregor, with permission to carry hagbuts and pistols anywhere north of the River Leven.⁷⁹ On 30 November 1602 Argyll was accused of negligence in his commission against the MacGregors and consequently his duties as the king's lieutenant.⁸⁰ Further MacGregor attacks were launched in December, including the raid on Glen Finlas on 17 December, led by Alasdair Ruadh MacGregor of Glenstrae's brother, Iain Dubh. This cattle raid was hugely damaging for the Colquhouns and their tenants. John MacGregor's transcription of the now almost illegible original inventory suggests as many as 846 ewes, 578 cows, 527 goats, 16 mares, and 2 horses were stolen.⁸¹ Around 36 houses were spoiled, at least one man was killed (John McGibbon), and two were captured (Thomas Grasicht and John McCasson).⁸²

In a complaint to the Privy Council on 21 December 1602, Alasdair of Luss showed keen awareness both of his legal rights and Argyll's jurisdictional scope. He invoked Argyll's commission of 1601, arguing that because Argyll had the 'hail race of Clan Gregour under his obedience and commandiement' he was therefore answerable for their behaviour.⁸³ In addition to this legal argument, the Colquhoun chief reportedly employed a more emotive approach. Semple of Fulwood and William Stewart, captain of

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 931, 977.

⁷⁵ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 375, 517. This may have been in retaliation for Stewart of Bute's attack on Campbell of Auchinbreck in October 1592 and it seems to have been a family dispute: Stewart was married to Campbell's mother. See *AT*, VII, 231.

⁷⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 977, 988, 992; *RPC*, Vol. VI, 517.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 992, 1035.

⁷⁸ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 507. For the other raids allegedly committed, see *Ibid.*, 488-91, 500-1.

⁷⁹ *GCA*: T-CL, Bundle XCVI, no. 4; *Cartulary*, 468.

⁸⁰ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 489-90.

⁸¹ *GCA*: T-CL, Bundle XCVI, ff. 9 (original); *NRS*: GD50/187 [Box II: 1600-10, Bundle 1603-4] (transcript).

⁸² *Ibid.* Fraser also refers to another earlier raid conducted on 7 December by Donnchadh MacGregor, uncle of Alasdair, which inflicted similar losses upon the Colquhouns. See Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 186-7.

⁸³ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 507-8, 484.

Dumbarton Castle, advised the Colquhoun chief to ‘adres to zour self, wyth als mony bludie sarks [bloody shirts] as ather ar deid or hurt of zour men, togitter wyth als money vemen [women], to present thame to his Maiestie in Stirling’.⁸⁴ They urged him to make the display while the French ambassador was still at court,⁸⁵ presumably because the presence of a foreign dignitary would embarrass the king into showing sympathy. Gordon confirms that this public exhibition of grief did take place, but he amplifies its extent by conflating the raid of Glen Finlas with the later, more serious engagement at Glen Fruin.⁸⁶ As pointed out by John MacGregor, the ‘bludie sarks’ strategy was not a ‘new invention’ and was employed by various other parties seeking royal justice in the late sixteenth century.⁸⁷

On 25 December 1602, Argyll was due to answer to these charges along with fresh allegations that he had sought to ‘trouble the Lennox and the Duke’s servants and followers’.⁸⁸ The truce established in May 1602 had been broken by Argyll’s kinsman, Campbell of Auchinbreck, who in November 1602 had raised an army of ‘1500 men in arms, furnished with hagbuts and pistolets, most of them Archibald, Earl of Eryll’s men’ and launched another attack on Stewart of Ardmaleish, the sheriff of Bute.⁸⁹ When night fell on 19 November, this Campbell host – ‘specially instigated by the Earl’ – landed on the Isle of Bute and raided the lands of Marion Stewart⁹⁰ and those of the sheriff himself, burning crops, assaulting tenants, and stealing cattle.⁹¹ On 11 January 1603, Argyll and Auchinbreck were denounced for this raid.⁹² On 1 February 1603, the dispute between Lennox and Argyll was successfully arbitrated by the king, and on that same day, Argyll and Huntly were reconciled after their own bitter, long-running feud.⁹³ As a consequence of his negligent or reluctant approach to carrying out his commission against the

⁸⁴ Fraser, *Colquhoun*, Vol. I, 188-9. (Reprint of original document)

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 247.

⁸⁷ NRS: GD50/187, Box II: 1600-1610, Bundle: 1603-4. A display in July 1593 by ‘certane poore weomen’ whose husbands or sons were killed in a raid by the Laird of Johnstone did not have the desired effect. They had fifteen ‘bloodie shirts...carried...through the town of Edinburgh’, but the king was ‘nothing moved’ and the ‘spectacle’ was deemed ‘in contempt of the king’. See Calderwood, *History*, V, 256. For other examples, see Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 29-30.

⁸⁸ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 1089.

⁸⁹ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 517.

⁹⁰ A widow whose husband had allegedly been ‘slain by some of their [the Campbells’] friends’. See *Ibid.*, 518.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 518.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 1106.

MacGregors, Argyll was replaced in this undertaking by Lennox, who made ‘many vows...for their overthrow’.⁹⁴

Just six days later, on 7 February 1603, the battle of Glen Fruin (or ‘The Slaughter in the Lennox’)⁹⁵ saw the heavy defeat of the Colquhouns by the MacGregors. The Colquhouns had been given a royal commission to resist the MacGregors’ ‘crewall interpryses’, while the MacGregors, led by their chief Alasdair Ruadh of Glenstrae, were apparently working under instruction of the earl of Argyll.⁹⁶ The MacGregors, ‘haifing concludit the distructione’ of the Colquhouns and the Buchanans, joined with members of the Clan Cameron⁹⁷ and ‘Clananverich’,⁹⁸ and together their force amounted to around 400 men.⁹⁹ Contemporary sources for the battle itself are somewhat slight,¹⁰⁰ but it seems the MacGregor-led army came to the Colquhouns’ lands of Glen Fruin (to the south-west of Luss)¹⁰¹ in battle array and Alasdair Colquhoun of Luss replied by raising his own force.¹⁰² Gordon claims that the two clan chiefs parleyed before the battle, but could not reach an agreement. Colquhoun then launched an attack on the MacGregors, hoping to ‘tak his enemies...vnawars’ and crush them with his superior numbers. However, Alasdair Ruadh had divided his army into two separate companies: one led by the MacGregor chief himself held its ground against the Colquhoun attack, while the other, commanded by Alasdair Ruadh’s brother Iain Dubh, ‘drew a compass about, and invaded the Laird of Luss his company when they least expected’.¹⁰³ Whether or not Gordon’s account of the MacGregors’ strategy is accurate, they emerged from the battle as decisive victors.¹⁰⁴ Their casualties were probably very light, with the noted exception of Iain Dubh, Alasdair Ruadh’s brother, who was killed.¹⁰⁵ On the other side between 60 and 140 Colquhouns, Buchanans and other Lennox men were killed, of whom ‘twentie-foure or threttie were

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1107.

⁹⁵ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 534 n.1.

⁹⁶ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 435-6. (Reprint of ‘The Laird of McGregours Declaratioun’). As noted by Pitcairn, both parties were ‘in a manner, equally armed with the Royal authority’. See *Ibid.*, 431.

⁹⁷ GCA: T-CL, Bundle XCVI, no. 46; *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 537-8.

⁹⁸ Possibly Clann Iain Abraich, the MacDonalds of Glencoe. Thanks to Dr MacGregor for this suggestion.

⁹⁹ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 432; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. VI, 204; ‘Diarey of Robert Birrel’, 58.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 413-4, 415, 419, 424, esp. 430-40; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. VI, 204; *RPC*, Vol. VI, 534 n. 1, 558 n. 1; *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 402 n. 1; ‘Diarey of Robert Birrel’, 57-8.

¹⁰¹ NGR: NS 2760 8940.

¹⁰² *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 432

¹⁰³ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 246.

¹⁰⁴ For oral traditions about the battle, see Newton, *Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid* 190-211; NRS: GD50/65.

¹⁰⁵ NRS: GD50/187, Box II: 1600-1610 Bundle: 1603-4; *A Chronicle of the Kings of Scotland*, ed. J.W. Mackenzie (Edinburgh, 1830), 165-6.

landed men of good ranke'.¹⁰⁶ It was later alleged that most of those killed on Colquhouns' side had been taken captive by the MacGregors 'befoir thai pat violent handis in thame, and crewallie slew thame'.¹⁰⁷ Alasdair, the chief of the Colquhouns, 'escaped narrowlie'.¹⁰⁸

The king and Council condemned the slaughter in the first of a series of 'ruthless edicts' against the MacGregors made on 24 February 1603, which called for their extirpation.¹⁰⁹ This punishment aimed to make an example of the MacGregors, to send a message of 'terroure to all posterities'.¹¹⁰ Outlawed and with a price on his head set at £1000,¹¹¹ the MacGregor chief Alasdair Ruadh first eluded capture by Campbell of Ardkinglas, but was then betrayed by the earl of Argyll who had promised to 'put him out of Scottish grund'.¹¹² Argyll kept 'ane Hielandman's promes' by sending him to Berwick, but Glenstrae was promptly returned to Scottish soil, apprehended, and brought to Edinburgh for trial.¹¹³ Unlikely as it may sound, this genuinely took place, as indicated by the payment of John Murray of 20 crowns 'as for the pryce of ane broune neag quhilk is deid in his Majesteis service in careing of M'Gregor at our command to Bervic and bak heir'.¹¹⁴

A declaration by the MacGregor chief at the time of his conviction provides fascinating insight into the political machinations of the earl of Argyll. According to Alasdair Ruadh, Argyll, acting as the king's lieutenant, persistently threatened his clan with disfavour unless they performed violent actions against various clans and individuals. For example, Argyll demanded that Alasdair Ruadh kill Campbell of Ardkinglas and MacAulay of Ardencaple, and launch attacks against the Colquhouns and the

¹⁰⁶ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 413-4, 415, 419, 424, 430-40; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. VI, 204; *RPC*, Vol. VI, 534 n. 1, 558 n. 1; *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 400, 402 n. 1; 'Diarey of Robert Birrel', 57-8. Gordon estimates as many as 200 men were killed on Colquhoun's side. See *Earldom of Sutherland*, 246.

¹⁰⁷ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 432. This detail was related at Glenstrae's trial and may have been an attempt to further emphasise the brutality of the MacGregors. It could even be the origin of the tradition about the massacre of students from Dumbarton, which is not mentioned in any contemporary material. Birrel claims that Alasdair Ruadh killed '60 honest men, besyde wemen and bairnis: he spared nane qr he came', and the king's denunciation of Alasdair claimed that he was 'not online the conductair and leidair of that...cumpany, bot thairwith he with his awin handis committit the maist horrible and barbarous crueltie that fell out that day, and culd nevir be satiat in bathing of him selff with the bluid of grit nowmeris of innocentis'. It is perhaps strange that these 'innocentis' are not specified, but this may nevertheless indicate that civilians were indeed killed during the battle. See 'Diarey of Robert Birrel', 57-8; *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 401.

¹⁰⁸ Calderwood, *History*, Vol. VI, 204.

¹⁰⁹ *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 400-2, 402, n. 1.

¹¹⁰ NRS: GD50/187, Box II: 1600-1610, Bundle: 1603-4; *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 400.

¹¹¹ *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 401.

¹¹² 'Diarey of Robert Birrel', 60; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. VI, 247.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Report on the Laing Manuscripts Preserved in the University of Edinburgh*, Vol. I (London, 1914), 100. My thanks to Dr MacGregor for this reference.

Buchanans.¹¹⁵ This desire to cause injury to the Colquhouns may have stemmed from their bond of manrent with Huntly, again suggesting Argyll's collusion in Sir Umfra's murder in 1592. Overall however, it seems that Argyll's goal was grander than simply redeeming slighted honour. He sought to manufacture unrest within the Lennox by manipulating clans into raids and warfare, obtain a government commission to pacify the disorder he had created, and then profit from consequent government rewards. Alasdair Ruadh claimed the king had promised Argyll the feu of Kintyre if he apprehended him.¹¹⁶ If this could all be achieved while also portraying his rival the Duke of Lennox as an incompetent, that was only an added benefit to Argyll. It seems reasonable to conclude that Argyll's reconciliation with Lennox on 1 February was insincere, and just days later he induced the MacGregors to attack the Colquhouns in order to undermine and humiliate Lennox. There was an immediate precedent for this kind of behaviour by Argyll as he had already disregarded the terms of the truce between the sheriff of Bute and Campbell of Auchinbreck in May 1602.

The immediate context of MacGregor's testimony does challenge its credibility, and he may have been casting the blame on Argyll in an attempt to save his own life and protect his clan. However, in light of the government's hard-line policy towards the MacGregors as a whole it was becoming increasingly unlikely that Alasdair Ruadh would be released, and perhaps he resolved to expose Argyll's duplicity with his last public statement. Indeed, the closing lines of Glenstrae's declaration weave moral indignation with sincere concern for the future welfare of his own clan:

And now, seing God and man seis it is greidenes of warldlie geir quhilk causis him [Argyll] to putt at me and my kin, and not the weill of the realme, nor to pacifie the samyn, nor to his Majesties honour, bot to putt down innocent men, to cause pure bairnes and infanttis bege, and pure wemen to perisch for hunger, quhen they ar heriet of their geir...[Argyll only has] leuf of geir, haueing nather respect to God nor honestie!¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Alasdair Ruadh also alleged that Argyll coerced the MacLeans and the Camerons into harrying the MacGregors' lands to impoverish the clan and make them increasingly desperate, forcing Alasdair's 'pure men thereafter to bege and steill'. See *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 435-6.

¹¹⁶ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 435, n. 13-4. Argyll later petitioned the Privy Council for his right to Kintyre as 'worthie reward' for his service against the MacGregors. This petition is undated, but may have been made in 1607. See *RPC*, Vol. VII, 749-50.

¹¹⁷ *Criminal Trials*, Vol. II, 436.

Ultimately, his declaration was in vain, and at his execution in Edinburgh on 20 January 1604, Alasdair Ruadh, as chief of the MacGregors, was ‘hangit his awin hight above the rest of hes freindis’.¹¹⁸

In the years that followed, various clans, including the Colquhouns, hunted down members of the Clan Gregor.¹¹⁹ On 24 November 1603, the Colquhouns presented three MacGregors before the Privy Council and these men were presumably executed.¹²⁰ Six years later on 18 November 1609, Alasdair Colquhoun asked the king for restitution since the Clan Gregor had returned to ‘thair former courses’, presumably renewed MacGregor raids.¹²¹ Intermittent violence continued and on 5 March 1611, the Colquhouns appeared before the Privy Council in Edinburgh with three captured MacGregors and the severed heads of three others. For the apprehension and killing of these outlaws they requested remuneration of 600 merks, but were only rewarded with 300: ‘ane hundreth merkis for every one of the three heidis of the McGregouris’.¹²² The message was clear for those hunting the MacGregors: dead was better than alive.

While this was clearly a period of serious disorder in the Lennox, there were at least some years of peace, perhaps as many as eight, between the Colquhouns and the MacFarlanes, which should be emphasised to avoid an impression of continuous feuding and warfare. However by May 1607, the feud had resumed with a vengeance, described by the Privy Council as being in ‘verie grite heit’.¹²³ In April, Alasdair Colquhoun wrote to the king, complaining that he had still not received assythment for the murder of his brother, and expressing concerns that Mar intended to obstruct his fight for justice by exploiting his connections with the king.¹²⁴ Both parties, again including Mar, were ordered to appear for arbitration by 23 June.¹²⁵ Alasdair Colquhoun refused to negotiate a reconciliation claiming that ‘he could not submit with the Makfarlans becaus they wer the King’s rebels for many criminall caussis’. Mar countered by pointing out that their inclusion was a necessity as they had ‘bene joynit with him in that querrell’.¹²⁶ News of this seemingly interminable feud now reached the ears of the king in London, who ordered

¹¹⁸ ‘Diarey of Robert Birrel’, 61; Calderwood, *History*, Vol. VI, 247; *The Chronicle of Perth, from the year 1210 to 1668* (Edinburgh, 1831), 10.

¹¹⁹ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 558 n. 1, 600, 786, 797, 862-3; *RPC*, Vol. VII, 11-2, 41, 287-8, 463-4. Notably, Sir Donnchadh Campbell of Glenorchy ‘hade great wearis with the Clangregoris’ between 1603 and 1604. See *Taymouth Bk*, 37-40.

¹²⁰ GCA: T-CL, Bundle XCVI, no. 13; *Cartulary*, 470.

¹²¹ *HP*, Vol. III, 117-8.

¹²² *RPC*, Vol. XIV, 594.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, 373.

¹²⁴ *HP*, Vol. III, 106.

¹²⁵ *RPC*, Vol. VII, 373.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV, 601.

the earl of Dunfermline and the other Councillors to ensure ‘all caus of grudge and evill [is] removed by thair reconciliatioun’.¹²⁷ In April 1608, arbiters were appointed for both sides: Walter Stewart of Blantyre for Colquhoun; John Bothwell, Lord of Holyroodhouse, for MacFarlane and Mar. Despite ‘great panes and travellis in that mater’, the peace talks broke down, with the arbiters unable to draw the two parties to any ‘reasounable mindis or compositioun’.¹²⁸

At some point between April 1608 and February 1610 however, the feud was settled. The specifics are not known and only the record of another later controversy confirms the approximate time of the settlement. On 15 February 1610, Iain MacFarlane, a tenant of Colquhoun of Luss (and importantly the son of the MacFarlane murdered by Sir Umfra), was charged with the murder of Katherine MacLerich in Little Hills Glen. Colquhoun was absolved of legal responsibility for his tenant because:

...the deadly feud between the Laird of Lus and the ClanFarlane...being removed, the entry of the said Johnne [Iain] will revive the feud and "procure grite trouble".¹²⁹

Although the feud had therefore been settled by February 1610, tensions clearly still remained between the two clans, and the Privy Council feared that any further strain on relations could restart hostilities. The Council advised that MacLerich entreat Anndra MacFarlane of Arrochar to provide justice for the actions of Iain, as the MacFarlane chief had ‘found surety for making all his men answerable to justice’.¹³⁰ The fragile truce between the Colquhouns and the MacFarlanes endured. In August 1610 and January 1611, the Colquhouns and MacFarlanes were both called up for pursuit of the MacGregors, and in September 1610, MacFarlane witnessed a band between Colquhoun and MacAulay of Ardincaple.¹³¹ This suggests that the feud had indeed been ‘removed’ and the two clans were on relatively amicable terms. However, it is worth noting that in February 1611 both clans were charged with failing to pursue the MacGregors, perhaps suggesting practical cooperation was actually rather limited.¹³²

Conclusion

The late sixteenth century was clearly a period of intense crisis for the Colquhouns of Luss. They faced a twelve-year minority rule after the death of their chief Iain in 1574, followed

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, 528.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, 73.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 414-5. This source was used above to determine the inception of the feud.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. IX, 47, 124, 659.

¹³² *Ibid.*, Vol. IX, 140.

by the murder of his son Sir Umfra in 1592 by his own kin. Embroiled in a serious feud with the MacFarlanes until at least 1608, they also suffered crushing defeat in battle at the hands of the MacGregors in 1603. Power struggles in the Lennox were nothing new, but this was a particularly difficult period for a clan like the Colquhouns, prominent north and south of the Firth of Clyde. A concrete explanation for Sir Umfra's death in 1592 remains elusive. It may have been an extension of the Colquhouns' feud with the MacFarlanes, a leadership challenge by his brother Iain, or indeed a combination of both. A recurrent theme of this case study (and thesis as a whole) is the impact of the high nobility's factional politics, which clearly influenced or even instigated feuds between smaller clans. There is compelling evidence to suggest that the rivalries between Argyll and Huntly and latterly Argyll and Lennox were significant factors in the Colquhouns' feuds with the MacFarlanes and the MacGregors. These regional magnates, Argyll in particular, treated the smaller clans as little more than pawns, pitting them against each other in proxy warfare, all to further their attempts at currying crown favour and enhancing the prestige of their own kindred through tangible prizes of land.

Military activity in the Lennox during this period was extensive, including endemic raiding, assassinations and other killings, and eventually a major pitched battle. It must be noted that these activities were engaged in by the Colquhouns almost as readily as they were by the MacFarlanes or the MacGregors. In both feuds involving the Colquhouns, there is a clear sense that cattle raids, especially if repeated annually, could escalate into more serious armed confrontation led by chiefs obliged by custom to protect or avenge their clansmen. Raids like Glen Finlas damaged the economic potential of the locale, and could prove deadly for those who resisted the raiders. The severity of the government's response to the MacGregors may be partly explained by the fact that a pitched-battle was fought so close to the Lowlands of Scotland, but the timing was also particularly dreadful, just six days after the king had witnessed Lennox and Argyll apparently settling their differences.

Chapter 7: The MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacLeods of Harris, 1594-1601

The feud between the MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacLeods of Harris in the late sixteenth century is best remembered in modern Gaelic tradition as ‘Cogadh na Cailliche Caime’, or the ‘War of the One-eyed Woman’.¹ The popular story states that Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat entered into a trial marriage (or ‘hand-fasting’)² with the sister of Ruairidh Mòr MacLeod of Harris, but when

...the sight of one of the lady's eyes were affected...Donald Gorme, to shew her all the indignity that he could, sent her back to Dunvegan, mounted on a one-eyed grey horse, led by a one-eyed lad, and followed by a terrier, also blind of an eye.³

This story has a clear folkloric element, and the ‘one-eyed woman’ motif appears in other clans’ traditions,⁴ but contemporary evidence certainly shows a divorce took place, and there is some justification for crediting the ensuing feud as the last of the traditional clan wars fought ‘over land or slighted honour’.⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the origins of the feud are more complex than the traditional narrative allows. Tension between the two kindreds was a near constant due to their competing claims over Trotternish in the north of Skye, lands which pertained to the MacDonalds, but were claimed by the MacLeods.⁶ As pointed out by Dawson, the lands ‘suffered a bewildering series of grants’ between 1495 and 1507: they were given to both the Harris and Lewis branches of the MacLeods, the MacDonalds of Sleat, the MacDonalds of Clanranald, and the earl of Huntly.⁷ This may have been the principal cause of a feud between the MacLeods of Harris and the MacDonalds of Sleat in the late 1560s, which the earl of Argyll unsuccessfully attempted to arbitrate in the summer of

¹ Cameron, *History and Traditions of Skye*, 57-8.

² Anton has demonstrated the dubiety of the hand-fasting tradition in the Highlands, while Sellar explored the ‘irregular’ nature of marriage customs in the region. See A.E. Anton, ‘Handfasting in Scotland’, *SHR*, 37, (October 1958), 89–102; Sellar, ‘Marriage’, 469-70, 477-9, 487.

³ Cameron, *History*, 57-8.

⁴ J.P. MacLean, *A History of the Clan MacLean* (Cincinnati, 1889), 51-2. In c. 1480, Coinneach MacKenzie allegedly repudiated his wife, Margaret, daughter of Iain MacDonald of Islay, in a manner identical to the above story. The ‘History of the MacDonalds’ claims that Alasdair Crotach MacLeod was imprisoned in Castle Tioram for seven years for repudiating Clanranald’s daughter. See *HP*, Vol. I, 68.

⁵ MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 136.

⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253; *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 432-3. At 80 merklands, Trotternish was the most valuable region in Skye, surpassing Sleat at 30 merklands.

⁷ Dawson, *Scotland Re-formed*, 72. On 7 September 1496, Alasdair, the son of Uilleam MacLeod of Dunvegan, was granted the two pennylands (‘unciatas’) of Trotternish, as well as the bailliary for the same lands. See *RMS*, Vol. II, 514.

1568. In the wake of the arbitration, MacLeod of Harris attacked some of MacDonald of Sleat's galleys, rekindling the controversy among 'that ragged companye'.⁸ Any mutual animosity was only magnified by continued political opposition in the 1580s, when the MacLeods supported Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart in his feud with the MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacDonalds of Dunivaig.⁹ In September 1585/6,¹⁰ James VI wrote to Uilleam MacLeod requesting his intervention on behalf of MacLean in 'resisting of the violence and persute of the said Clandonald'.¹¹ The MacLeods were clearly involved in a significant capacity, as MacLean was only released from captivity by Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig when MacLean provided his own son and the son of MacLeod of Harris as pledges.¹²

The fallout from this feud fostered a volatile political environment of shifting alliances. The MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacDonalds of Dunivaig attempted to buttress support against a powerful new coalition in the Isles consisting of the MacLeods, the MacLeans, and the MacKenzies by allying with the earl of Huntly and the Clan Chattan confederation based in the central and eastern Highlands.¹³ Conflict was averted through diplomacy between the MacLeods and the Clan Chattan, who entered into a bond of friendship on 15 January 1588.¹⁴ Relations between the MacDonalds and the MacLeods then softened through the marriage of Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat and Màiri (or Marion), the sister of Uilleam and Ruairidh Mòr MacLeod of Harris, arranged at some point prior to November 1590.

When Uilleam MacLeod died in 1590, his younger brother, Ruairidh Mòr, became the Tutor of Harris and *de facto* leader of the clan while his nephew, Iain, was a minor.¹⁵ For the next five years the MacLeods and the MacDonalds enjoyed a period of cooperation, apparently ushered in by the marriage between Dòmhnall Gorm and Màiri MacLeod. In June 1593, Dòmhnall Gorm 'confederated' with Ruairidh Mòr MacLeod of Harris, MacDonald of Glengarry, and MacKinnon of Strath, to invade MacKenzie's lands in Ross

⁸ *CSPS*, Vol. II, 453-4.

⁹ Prior to this feud, the MacLeod chief Tormod had married Janet, the mother of Lachlann Mór MacLean, on 3 December 1583. Tormod had previously been married to Lachlann's aunt. See *Dunvegan Bk*, 19-20; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 205-6; *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 46-9.

¹⁰ There is some debate about the date of this document. In the *Book of Dunvegan*, it is printed as 'xvix [sic] day of September 1588'. Donald Gregory places the date at 18 September 1585, which is also supported by Maclean-Bristol, but it could feasibly be September 1586 as the feud was not resolved until April 1587. See *Dunvegan Bk*, 139; Gregory, *History*, 231; Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 90, 93, 97 n. 11.

¹¹ *Dunvegan Bk*, 139.

¹² *History of the feuds*, 93.

¹³ Cathcart, *Kinship*, 176. In 1586, the MacDonalds had entered into a bond of manrent with Huntly.

¹⁴ NRS: GD176/151.

¹⁵ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253; *Dunvegan Bk*, 22-3, 28.

with an army of 2,000 men.¹⁶ Next year in July 1594, Dòmhnall Gorm joined with Ruairidh Mòr in a mercenary expedition to Ulster with a combined force of c. 1,200 men¹⁷ to assist Ó Domhnaill and Maguire in their siege of Enniskillen Castle.¹⁸ The growing ambition of Dòmhnall Gorm was an obstacle to any future partnership between the two clans. In his conflict with the MacKenzies in 1593, Dòmhnall Gorm had apparently declared himself ‘King of the Isles’ (*Rìgh Innse Gall*) and successor to the headship of the forfeited Lordship.¹⁹ During the campaign in Ireland, he reportedly hoped to ‘put away his wife, and to marry O’Donel’s daughter’.²⁰ Ruairidh Mòr may not have been aware of his brother-in-law’s intentions at this stage, but it is clear that from the outset of this marriage Dòmhnall Gorm was actively pursuing a more politically expedient marital match. Ó Domhnaill and the other Irish chiefs desperately needed ‘spare forces’ (the Hebridean mercenaries) to challenge the Tudor establishment in Ireland,²¹ and in exchange, they could have supported Dòmhnall Gorm’s revival of the forfeited Lordship.

MacLeod and MacDonald had returned to Scotland by September 1594, leaving behind a band of 300 soldiers placed at the disposal of Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill.²² Initially, the campaign was reported a success: the mercenaries were apparently ‘well entreated in Ireland’ and received ‘great gains and profit’. Promising to return next year, the MacDonalds and MacLeods began ‘labouring to gather together for that purpose all the forces they can levy’.²³ However, a later report from December claims ‘the most part of the forces left by Donald Gorme and MacLeod Harris in Ireland have returned home malcontent’, suggesting defeat in battle, cash flow problems, or discord with the Irish chiefs.²⁴ True to their word however, the Hebrideans amassed a huge force of mercenaries in the early summer of 1595. By 3 June, Iain, son of Uilleam MacLeod of Harris, had died, and Ruairidh Mòr, his uncle, succeeded him.²⁵ The ever active Ruairidh Mòr mustered his clan to join the MacLeods of Lewis, along with the Sleat and Dunivaig branches of the Clan Donald. Together their pooled resources raised a formidable army of around 3,000

¹⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 95, 99.

¹⁷ Originally reported as between 2,500 and 3,000 men, the army was later estimated more modestly at 1,200. See *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. III, 221; *CSPI*, Vol. V, 260, 265.

¹⁸ *CSPI*, Vol. V, 259-60; *AFM* 6, M1594.7.

¹⁹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 95, 99.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 422-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 677.

²² *Ibid.*, 457-8. Another source claims they left 800 men behind. Although the mercenaries would have primarily stayed for prospective plunder, Dòmhnall Gorm may have been demonstrating to Ó Domhnaill the value of a marriage alliance with his clan. See *Ibid.*, 477.

²³ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 477.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 500.

²⁵ *Dunvegan Bk*, 22-3, 28, 42.

men.²⁶ The company was reportedly ready to depart as early as June, but Dòmhnall Gorm and his ‘maughe’ (brother-in-law)²⁷ Ruairidh Mòr ‘fell out’.²⁸ The reasons for this upset are not known, and could have been a simple disagreement over strategy. Perhaps the newly elevated MacLeod chief resented being subordinated by Dòmhnall Gorm's closest ally, Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig. Alternatively, the explicit reference to Ruairidh Mòr as Dòmhnall Gorm's ‘maughe’ could imply the quarrel was related to family affairs, specifically marital relations – perhaps the proposed marriage between Dòmhnall Gorm and Ó Domhnaill’s daughter had been discovered. Whatever the nature of the controversy, it is clear that familial ties were failing to cool the simmering tension between the MacLeods and the MacDonalds.

Political upheaval may have stalled the sailing of the mercenaries, but their sizeable force still remained on the west coast of Scotland and threatened to tip the balance of power in Ireland. Anxious to prevent their intervention, the English government put pressure on James VI to employ the earl of Argyll and Lachlann Mòr MacLean to prevent their sailing. This placed the MacLeods of Harris in opposition to MacLean, their long-term ally.²⁹ Despite this, and their apparent clash with Dòmhnall Gorm, the riches promised by the earl of Tyrone proved irresistible and they resolved to maintain their involvement. Nevertheless, the MacLeods were careful to avoid upsetting MacLean and landed on Mull to parley before leaving for Ireland. According to John Auchinross, MacLean's secretary,³⁰ the

...MacLeod Lewis and the principal friends of MacLeod Harris came on land and spoke [with] MacLean in Duart, to excuse themselves for their passing to Ireland with Donald Gorme MacConnell. The only cause thereof was their receipt of great gains which came to Scotland from Tyrone, and seeing the voyage was no way to hurt MacLean they thought good to take commodity and profit when offered, and assured MacLean that whenever he shall "haif to do" against the Clan Domhnall that they shall be found ready in his service, as they have been before.³¹

²⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 648.

²⁷ ‘Mauch’ or ‘maughe’ refers to a ‘male connection by marriage’, for example, a brother-in-law or son-in-law. See *Dictionary of the Scots Language* <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/mauch_n_1>

²⁸ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 619.

²⁹ Bound together by familial links, the MacLeods and the MacLeans maintained a close allegiance in the 1590s. In 1591, the former are described as Lachlann’s ‘principall freendes and partakers’, and later in 1595, Lachlann defended the character of his faithful allies to the English diplomat, Robert Bowes. See *Ibid.*, Vol. X, 613; Vol. XI, 629.

³⁰ Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 68.

³¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 650.

From the MacLeods' perspective, this was a shrewd piece of diplomacy that placated MacLean while ensuring their place on the expedition. In truth, MacLean was not concerned by their involvement, describing the MacLeods of Harris (and the MacLeods of Lewis) as

...my friends and have been in my service against them [the MacDonalds], but, being young men of high spirit, desirous to acquaint thame in wars and receiving great gains, they are persuaded to pass with them, seeing this voyage was not against me.³²

George Nicolson, the English diplomat, offered an alternative and expanded view of this politicking. He claimed the MacLeods did not visit MacLean of their own volition, but were sent by the MacDonalds to 'persuade his aid' in their expedition. The MacLeods of Lewis³³ were swayed by MacLean and agreed to leave the expedition, confessing its 'whole intentions and counsels'.³⁴ After their meeting with MacLean, the MacDonalds 'took suspicion of [MacLeod of Lewis] and carried him captive so that he and his forces should not leave them'.³⁵ It does not appear that MacLeod of Harris was also captured, but this was clear intimidation from the MacDonalds. Lines of loyalty were being drawn.

Tensions ran high within the mercenary camp with the looming presence of MacLean and Argyll sowing doubt among the leaders.³⁶ After a month of delay and indecision, the islanders finally departed for Ireland on 18 or 19 July.³⁷ The campaign was a debacle from the outset. In a 'pretty feat of war', MacLean ambushed the Clanranald contingent on Mull before they crossed the Irish Sea, capturing 700 soldiers, including the Clanranald chief and Dòmhnall Gorm's brother.³⁸ The main force fared little better. A large fleet of Islanders landed in Carrickfergus to receive supplies from the Earl of Tyrone, before mooring in the bay of the Copeland Isles off the north-east coast of Ireland,³⁹ On 27 July, they waylaid a merchant ship laden with wine, stole several casks, and that night

³² *Ibid.*, 629. He may have been excusing his inability to prevent their sailing.

³³ Bowes does not specify the involvement of the Harris branch.

³⁴ Like the MacLeods of Harris, the MacLeods of Lewis had strong ties to MacLean: the MacLeod chief Torcall was 'sister's son to MacLean'. See *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 643; Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 146-7.

³⁵ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 676.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 647-8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 661, 667-8. According to Auchinross, Lachlann imprisoned the leaders, but the remainder of the captives were released near their own lands. See *Ibid.*, 668.

³⁹ *CSPI*, Vol. V, 350, 353.

‘drank freely’.⁴⁰ On the morning of 28 July, they were ambushed by Captains George Thornton and Gregory Rigges of the *HMS Popinjay* and *HMS Charles*:

They have slain many of them and drove them to a little isle, where they landed. But the island being little and wanting covert they slew them there out of their ships, as well as on the water.⁴¹

Escape was impossible, forcing the MacDonalds to provide pledges to Thornton and Rigges. They went further, offering to switch sides and provide ‘their service against Her Majesty's enemies’.⁴² Soon after, they returned to Scotland, although Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig, ashamed that ‘materis ar nocht keipit to the Erle [of Tyrone]’, sent Ó Domhnaill a force of 600 men led by his son Aonghas Òg.⁴³ By 22 August 1595, the majority of the company had returned to Scotland, many fearful their unprotected lands at home would be harried by MacLean.⁴⁴

The MacLeods of Harris were elsewhere during the incident at the Copeland Isles, but suffered a setback of their own when they were attacked by English cavalry upon landfall in Lough Foyle in Ulster.⁴⁵ This resulted in the deaths of ‘sixteen gentlemen of [their] house, two or three of them very special gentlemen’.⁴⁶ On 24 August, George Erskine reported:

MacLeod of Harris is still in Ireland in great anger for revenge, if possible, for such scathe and dishonour he has gotten...Argyll's messenger is returned, without availing to withdraw MacLeod of Harris from these parts. He and his whole people are so stirred to anger by their last dishonour that they have vowed never to leave Ireland if it be not repaired to their contentment... This people is of all the islesmen the most courageous and of best spirit...⁴⁷

Lachlann MacLean claimed that the MacLeods were ‘in some wrath’ with the MacDonalds’ switch of allegiance.⁴⁸ Clan expectations demanded retribution for the loss suffered at the

⁴⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 683.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* In 1594, the *Popinjay* had been specially selected for this service against the Scottish galleys. See *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. III, 107.

⁴² *CSPI*, Vol. V, 359, 370; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 684-5; *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. III, 234, 237; Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces*, 251-2.

⁴³ *CSPI*, Vol. V, 359; *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 684.

⁴⁴ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 648.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 683; *AFM 6*, M1595.15.

⁴⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 687; Hayes McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces* 254.

⁴⁷ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 687-8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 685.

hands of the English, a responsibility magnified – and made deeply personal – by the likelihood that some of Ruairidh Mòr’s closest male family members were among the MacLeod dead (probably the two or three ‘very special gentlemen’). Duty-bound and personally motivated to enact vengeance, Ruairidh Mòr must have felt betrayed by the limp capitulation and *volte-face* of his brother-in-law and the other MacDonalds. The MacLeods stayed in Ireland with 600-700 men and joined up with Ó Domhnaill,⁴⁹ and with their help he captured the castle in Costello, before ravaging Connaught and Galway, carrying off ‘wealth and riches’.⁵⁰ The MacLeods’ campaign of 1595 is celebrated in Eoin Óg Ó Muirgheasáin’s elegy for Ruairidh Mòr, composed c. 1626:

Tar Drobhaois tar Slighigh siar
gan shlighidh rochaoil ’na raon,
tug iarraidh ar ndíol na ndámh,
a lán díobh triallaidh re a thaobh.

Baile an Mhúta adhnaidh uaidh
gan adhbhaidh dúnta ’na dhiaidh;
comha is í dá déanamh dhóibh
fóir Sgí ní ghéabhadh gan gliaidh.

Dún Mheic Fheórais airgtheair uaidh
go i daingne scólais tar sáil...

Crodh Bóghaineach d’éigsibh uaidh
di óroineach ní hé a-mháin,
ní thug ar ais uatha féin
réir ’s na tuatha leis do láimh...

A bhfuair riamh mun ráith-sin Ír
do riar buair nó d’fháinnibh óir
gan áireamh ar chrodh do chléir –
ag réir sgol do dháileadh dhóibh.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 684-5, 687.

⁵⁰ *AFM* 6, M1595.15.

On a wide ranging advance to the west
across the Drowes, over the river of Sligo,
he saw that the poets were rewarded -
a full company of them were with him.

He set Ballymote aflame;
in his track no house stands with closed doors;
there was an attempt at terms with them,
but the Skye troops would not accept; they would fight.

Dún Mheic Fheórais was pillaged by him;
to that stronghold he directed his course across the sea...

To give away the cattle wealth of Banagh
to his poets was characteristic of his golden generosity,
and not that only, he did not take in return
from his clansmen that were with him the tribute due him...

All that he ever got in Ráth Ír [Ireland]
in booty of cattle or golden rings –
for the poets cattle unnumbered –
he divided out to the schools (of poets) as recompense.⁵¹

The repeated use of the motif of the patron's generosity to his company of bards has been described as 'excessive',⁵² yet when viewed in the context of surrounding events, it may imply the main objective of the campaign, for Ruairidh Mòr at least, was not solely the acquisition of wealth and riches, but salvaging the honour of the chief and the clan. A desire for vengeance may be reflected in the unrelenting and unmerciful nature of the MacLeod advance: 'there was an attempt at terms with them, but the Skye troops would not accept; they would fight'.

⁵¹ MacLeod, 'Images of Scottish warriors', 172-5. The poem probably conflates the 1594 and 1595 campaigns together.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 172.

In a letter from March 1596, Lachlann MacLean notes Dòmhnall Gorm and Aonghas MacDonald were already ‘making prepara[tions] for mending of their galleys...appointed for transporting of their a[rmed] men’ into Ireland once more.⁵³ However, the balance of power had firmly tipped towards MacLean’s faction with the marriage of his eldest son to MacKenzie’s sister in the early months of 1596.⁵⁴ According to Robert Bowes

MacLean has greatly increased his force by the late marriage solemnised betwixt his eldest son and the sister of MacKenzie (a person of great power and action in the Highlands in the north). In which respect the King intending to use the service and means of MacLean and MacKenzie to draw the Isles to his obedience...⁵⁵

After the disaster of the last campaign, salvaged only by their own efforts, the MacLeods were presumably disillusioned with the entire mercenary venture, particularly the leadership of the MacDonalds, and they must have recognised the strength of the emerging MacLean/MacKenzie faction. Upon his eventual return to Scotland in early March,⁵⁶ Ruairidh Mòr seems to have honoured his pact with MacLean, resulting in his capture and imprisonment by an indignant MacDonald of Sleat. On 30 April 1596, Robert Bowes reported:

Donald Gorm and his faction have taken prisoner MacLeod Harris returning from MacLean. This is done either upon jealousy that Harris was joined with MacLean against Tyrone or else by this fine pretence to keep Harris fast to themselves and with his own will and assent.⁵⁷

This corresponds with an account by Dioness Campbell the Dean of Limerick written around April 1596:

There was also discention betwene yonge Donell Gorme and William M^cCloyd of the Herrys, whose sister, by M^cIllaines [MacLean’s] aunt, the said Donell Gorme did marry, beinge in that respecte his owne cosen germaen but by reason of the controversie growinge to bloodshead about some land in the iland Skihanagh [Skye] or Troutornes, I know not wheather, [Dòmhnall Gorm] was devorsed from her upon

⁵³ *CSPS* Vol. XII, 169.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 151, 159.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

some causes pretended, although I myself did much labour with them to the contrarye.⁵⁸

Limerick's account has been identified as confirming the traditional version of the origins of the MacLeod-MacDonald feud in 1601 due to the similarity of events (particularly the marital upset).⁵⁹ However, as it was written in 1596, it details incidents that took place at least five years before the eventual feud in 1601. Other contextual evidence indicates that he was writing about events in 1596. For one, Limerick's avowed involvement in negotiations between the clans is extremely significant. He was definitely in Scotland in early 1596, on a diplomatic mission to convince the earl of Argyll to provide military support for the Elizabethan government in Ireland.⁶⁰ Therefore, it seems plausible that he approached the MacLeods and the MacDonalds to bring about their involvement on behalf of Elizabeth, but then became embroiled in negotiations between the feuding parties. Limerick may have been attempting to ensure the safe release of Ruairidh Mòr as well as resolve the marital situation. Although Bowes does not detail any specific violence or set-piece skirmish, it seems fairly likely that 'bloodshead' was involved in Dòmhnall Gorm's apprehension of Ruairidh Mòr. Interestingly, Limerick implies that the publically stated reason for the dissolution of the marriage was an invention of Dòmhnall Gorm: he divorced Màiri 'upon some causes pretended'.⁶¹ Admittedly, this leaves open the improbable possibility of a humiliating repudiation based on Màiri's disfigurement, yet Bowes' explanation for MacLeod's capture may reveal Dòmhnall Gorm's true justification for divorce. Since at least 1594, he had probably been looking for a convenient excuse to separate from Màiri while marrying Ó Domhnaill's sister remained a reasonable prospect. Ruairidh's pact with Lachlann may have personally aggrieved Dòmhnall Gorm, but it also provided an ideal pretext for divorce. In summary, it seems probable that around April 1596 Dòmhnall Gorm divorced, or at least repudiated his wife Màiri, while he held his brother-in-law Ruairidh Mòr captive.

By June 1596, Ruairidh Mòr had been released, and in January 1597 he again attached himself to MacLean, accompanying him in his negotiations with the earl of Tyrone.⁶² Dòmhnall Gorm's brute force tactics had backfired as MacLeod of Lewis was

⁵⁸ *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 49; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 206.

⁵⁹ MacGregor, 'Statutes', 134, n. 89.

⁶⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 185. For details of his mission in Scotland, see *Ibid.*, 185, 198, 201; *CSPI*, Vol. II, 77, 186, 246-8.

⁶¹ *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 49; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 206.

⁶² *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 244; Vol. XIII, 175-6.

also reported as having been ‘abstracted’ to MacLean in August 1595.⁶³ Politically outmanoeuvred by MacLean, Dòmhnall Gorm was losing allies at an alarming rate.⁶⁴ Even by 1598 however, these growing tensions had not escalated into all-out warfare, and the relations of the clans took another interesting turn. In March, Dòmhnall Gorm condemned the execution of Torcall Dubh MacLeod of Lewis by Coinneach MacKenzie and called for a general pursuit of the MacKenzie chief.⁶⁵ In this endeavour, he claimed support from all of the principal island chiefs, including Lachlann MacLean ‘by McLeod of Harris’s means’, perhaps a sign of growing rapprochement between the island clans.⁶⁶ It seems however that Dòmhnall Gorm’s true objective was the revival of the Lordship of the Isles through an alliance with the English queen. As noted by MacCoinnich, the discord between Queen Elizabeth and James VI provided an opportunity for Dòmhnall to ‘create the most favourable conditions to further his claim to the Lordship’.⁶⁷ On 29 March 1598, it was reported by George Nicolson that the ‘Islanders come not in, neither give their obedience, looking for troubles between her Majesty and the King’ so that Dòmhnall Gorm could ‘claim his title to be Lord of the Isles’.⁶⁸ In April, an anonymous letter of service to Elizabeth claimed that Dòmhnall Gorm, the ‘Lord of the Isles of Scotland and Chief of the whole Clandonell Irishmen’, had support from most of the major clans in the West Highlands and Isles.⁶⁹ The Clanranald, the Camerons, and the MacLeods of Lewis were all ‘faithfully bound, obliged and sworn to follow, serve obey and assist with all their powers and forces’ while Ruairidh Mòr and Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig were ‘faithfully bonded and confederate’ with Dòmhnall.⁷⁰ Importantly, Ruairidh Mòr is referred to as Dòmhnall Gorm’s brother-in-law.⁷¹ This may suggest the repudiation or divorce of 1596 (or even earlier) had been reversed and the couple had since reconciled. There is however a possibility that the anonymous writer was simply misinformed about the nature of the familial relations, and because the divorce had not yet been formalised, Ruairidh Mòr was still technically Dòmhnall Gorm’s brother-in-law. At the very least however, the two clans were clearly on more amicable terms than in 1595/6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 687-8.

⁶⁴ Even the Clanranald were reported as adhering to MacLean’s party in the wake of their defeat earlier in 1595, along with MacNeill of Barra, MacLean of Lochbuy, and MacIain of Ardnamurchan. See *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 688.

⁶⁵ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 182.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ MacCoinnich, ‘Conflict and Identity’, 157; *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 182.

⁶⁸ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 182.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁷⁰ Hayes-McCoy has suggested that this document was wrongly dated to 1598 and should be dated instead to 1596. However, the mention of Sir Seumas as clan chief of the MacDonalds of Dunivaig confirms a 1598 date: in that year he deposed his father as chief and before then he had been a hostage in Edinburgh. See Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces*, 253 n. 1.

⁷¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 191.

Dòmhnall Gorm's invocation of the Lordship of the Isles has led to him being dubbed a 'dangerous lunatic' who harboured 'delusions of potency' by Maclean-Bristol.⁷² While Dòmhnall Gorm may have struggled to match the widespread support of previous claimants to the lordship like Dòmhnall Dubh in 1545,⁷³ the title still held significant power in the Isles. By aligning with the English Queen, evoking Dòmhnall Dubh's alliance with Henry VIII and the earlier Treaty of Westminster-Ardtornish in 1462, Dòmhnall Gorm hoped to outmanoeuvre the Scottish king and restore the MacDonalds' counterbalancing powerbase on the west coast.⁷⁴ Yet the English had little serious interest in fostering problems for the Scottish king and were instead committed to stopping the Highland mercenary trade with Ireland.

Dòmhnall Gorm's biggest rival in the Isles was Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart, who may have had serious pretensions to the forfeited Lordship (in all but name) through his military aptitude and 'consinguintie with the principall lords of the ilands'.⁷⁵ At the end of the sixteenth century, the MacLeods of Harris, while a powerful clan in their own right, were caught between two supremely ambitious chiefs. However, there may have been burgeoning cooperation between the MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacLeans of Duart as Dòmhnall Gorm's letter of service in April 1598 was delivered to Nicolson by John Auchinross, MacLean's servant. This had the potential to ripple out and heal the rift between MacLean and Dunivaig, and Ruairidh Mòr and Dòmhnall Gorm.⁷⁶

Just a few months later on 5 August 1598, Lachlann Mòr MacLean was killed in battle against the MacDonalds of Dunivaig in their ongoing feud over Islay.⁷⁷ News of his sudden demise was met with shock and disbelief,⁷⁸ and immediately created a power vacuum in the Isles. For the MacLeods, the death of their close ally was a significant blow, leaving them isolated and at risk from MacDonald aggression. Some historians claim that the MacLeods remained loyal to their MacLean allies and joined (along with the Camerons, the MacKinnons and the MacNeils of Barra) in retaliations against the MacDonalds, culminating in the defeat of the MacDonalds at the battle of 'Bern Bige' in Islay in 1598, but there is little contemporary evidence for these events.⁷⁹ Four years later, in 1602,

⁷² Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 231-2.

⁷³ Cathcart, 'Donald Dubh's Rebellion', 239-64.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 241-2.

⁷⁵ *Maitland Miscellany*, Vol.IV, 49; *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 205.

⁷⁶ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 186, 191.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 255; Maclean-Bristol, *Murder Under Trust*, 238-52.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁷⁹ Mackenzie, *Outer Hebrides*, 181-2; R.C. MacLeod, *The Macleods of Dunvegan from the Time of Leod to the End of the Seventeenth Century* (1927), 126-7.

Lachlann's son Eachann invaded Islay in a delayed retaliation for his father's death, but the involvement of the MacLeods (or indeed the Camerons, MacKinnons and MacNeills) is not reported.⁸⁰

The precise timing of the commencement of open war between the MacLeods and the MacDonalds meanwhile is unclear. Government documents begin reporting the feud in late June 1601 and claim hostilities had 'lately' broken out.⁸¹ In Limerick's account from April 1596, the land dispute over Trotternish was the underlying source of conflict between the two clans – 'by reason of the controversy growing to bloodshed about some land in the island Skihanagh [Skye] or Troutornes' – and this may again have been the principal cause in 1601.⁸² Significantly, Trotternish had been included in the original 1598 grant of lands to the Fife Adventurers,⁸³ perhaps stimulating the MacLeods or the MacDonalds to assert their control before it could be claimed by the inbound Lowlanders.

The traditional catalyst of Dòmhnall Gorm's repudiation of Ruairidh Mòr's sister is still possible considering their apparent reconciliation by April 1598. A second abrupt repudiation would only have amplified the MacLeods' humiliation. Robert Gordon's account, written between 1615 and 1630, mentions a repudiation of Màiri before a formal legal divorce took place:

Donald Gorme Mackonald had mareid Sir Rory Mackloyd his sister, and for some displeasure or jealousie conceived against her, he did repudiat her; whervpon Sir Rorie sent message to Donald Gorme, desireing him to tak home his wyff agane.⁸⁴

This could refer to events in 1596. Gordon continues:

Donald Gorme not onlie refused to obey his request, bot also intended a divorcement against his wyff; which when he had obteyned, he mareid the sister of Kenneth MacKeinzie, Lord of Kintayle. Sir Rorie Macloyd took this disgrace (as he thought it) so heighlie, that he assembled all his countreyemen, and his tryb (the Seill-tormat) without delay, and invaded with fyre and suord a pairt of Donald Gorme his lands in the yle of Sky; which lands Rorie claimed to apperteyne unto himselff.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 1024, 1036-7, 1045.

⁸¹ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 263.

⁸² *CSPS*, Vol. XII, 206.

⁸³ *RPS*, 1598/6/5; *RPC*, Vol. V, 462-3.

⁸⁴ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

According to Gordon therefore, Ruairidh Mòr gave Dòmhnall Gorm one last chance to reverse his decision. War followed only when the divorce was formalised and Dòmhnall Gorm married into another family. Just as the marriage of MacLean's son and MacKenzie's sister had aroused much comment in 1596, this new union was of 'major political significance' and signalled a general shift in the political landscape.⁸⁶ Three years earlier, Dòmhnall Gorm had led condemnations of MacKenzie's execution of Torcall Dubh MacLeod of Lewis, but now the two leaders were apparently joined by familial bonds. Meanwhile, there is reason to believe the MacLeods of Harris remained cordial with their Lewis kin, which in turn strained their relations with the MacKenzies.⁸⁷ Affinities had drifted far from the political situation in the 1580s, which saw the MacKenzies and MacLeods of Harris allied against Dòmhnall Gorm. The hostility between the MacKenzies and the MacLeods of Lewis now made such an arrangement less tenable. By marrying into the MacKenzies, a clan on the rise, Dòmhnall Gorm had finally found himself a suitable match, and was making a clear political statement of dissociation from the MacLeods of Harris.

Eventually, Ruairidh Mòr abandoned diplomacy and resorted to military action. His first target, according to Gordon, is extremely significant: 'a pairt of [Dòmhnall Gorm's] lands in the yle of Sky'.⁸⁸ Avenging the insult given to his sister and clan was a matter of urgency, but he may have taken the opportunity to push his claim to the contested lands of Trotternish. Retaliatory raids were conducted by both clans, initially choreographed to avoid open battle. After the MacLeods' invasion of the MacDonalds' lands in Skye, Dòmhnall Gorm, 'impatient of this injurie', struck back with a raid on Harris.⁸⁹ Another notable encounter was the battle or skirmish of Carinish in North Uist, which saw the defeat of a MacLeod raiding party of forty men by a small MacDonald force of twelve.⁹⁰ Apparently forewarned about the MacLeods' raid, the locals left their cattle and goods within the sanctuary of the lands of Trinity Church in Carinish, which the MacLeods stole

⁸⁶ Keith Brown, *Noble Society in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000), 129.

⁸⁷ The two MacLeod kindreds had shared a mutual ally in Lachlann MacLean, and Torcall Dubh was married to another of Ruairidh Mòr's sisters. Robert Gordon claims that 'some of the Seill-Torquill' fought on behalf of the MacLeods of Harris at the decisive set-piece battle between the MacLeods and the MacDonalds in 1601. See I.F. Grant, *The Macleods: the history of a clan, 1200-1956* (London, 1959), 186; MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility*, 159; *Earldom of Sutherland*, 245.

⁸⁸ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ For a rendition of local oral tradition recorded c. 1871, see F.W.L. Thomas, 'Notices of Three Churches in North Uist, Benbecula, and Grimsay, said to have been Built in the Fourteenth Century', *Archaeologia Scotica*, 5 (1) (Edinburgh, 1884), 231-7. For a song composed about the battle, see *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 50-3.

before being ambushed by the MacDonalds.⁹¹ Local tradition and poetry suggest that the two sides initially exchanged volleys of arrows, with the outnumbered MacDonalds using a gradual tactical retreat to inflict heavy casualties on the MacLeods.⁹² The MacLeod leader Dòmhnall Glas and ‘most’ of his followers were killed.⁹³ Dòmhnall mac Iain mhic Sheumais, the leader of the MacDonalds, also fell wounded:

Latha Blàr na Fèitheadh

Bha do lèine na ballan.

Bha an t-saighead na spreòd

Throimh chorp seòlta na glaineadh.

The day of the Battle of the Runnel

your shirt was blotted.

The arrow stuck out of

the skilled body of whiteness.⁹⁴

Repeated tit-for-tat incursions led to an intensification of conduct from both clans. Their raids became notable for their brutality and extensive devastation of territory, as described by Robert Gordon:

Thus both parties (the Clandonald and Seill-Tormat) wer bent headlong against others, with a spirite full of revenge and furie; and so continued mutuallie infesting one another with spoills and cruell slaughters, to the vtter ruyn and desolation of both ther cuntries, vntill the inhabitants were forced to eat horses, doggs, cattis, and other filthie beasts.⁹⁵

This excerpt has been used by some historians to encapsulate the harsh realities of Highland warfare.⁹⁶ Gordon’s avowed prejudice against the Highlands clans may mean that embellishment was employed here, but it could well be a fair representation of the severe consequences of a large-scale feud between two powerful clans. The *Chronicles of*

⁹¹ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244; Mackenzie, *Outer Hebrides*, 206.

⁹² Allegedly, Dòmhnall divided his small force into three handfuls of men and stationed them across the ground overlooking the church. During the skirmish, he ordered his men to ‘retrograde gently...so that while their arrows were telling with galling effect in the fray, those of their opponents were falling spent at their feet’. See Thomas, ‘Notices of Three Churches’, 233-4.

⁹³ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244.

⁹⁴ *Gàir nan Clàrsach*, 52-3.

⁹⁵ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244.

⁹⁶ Brown, *Bloodfeud*, 7, 42 n. 204.

the Frasers claims that 1601 and 1602 were particularly wretched years in the Highlands due to plague and famine. The former ‘spread from Forth to the North, and raged here the length of Glenelg [but] non dyed there nor in our farr Highlands and north isles’. In 1602, famine struck ‘all the North and Highlands over’: fungus ‘blasted’ the barley and the corn yield was ‘lick-dusted trash’.⁹⁷ With these natural hardships overlapping with a destructive feud, the desperate situation described by Gordon may have been very real for the common people of the warring clans.

Raids and scorched-earth tactics had failed to bring about a decisive outcome, and the feud finally culminated in a large pitched-battle between the two clans in 1601. Known to tradition as *Blàr Coire na Creiche*, the ‘Battle of the Corrie of the Spoil’,⁹⁸ this engagement was fought in Skye at ‘Binquhillin’ (one of the Cuillin hills).⁹⁹ While Ruairidh Mòr was in Argyll, ‘craiveing aid and advyse from the Earle of Argyle’, the MacDonalds marched into the MacLeods’ lands in Skye, forcing Ruairidh Mòr’s brother Alasdair to assemble an army to resist: ‘all the inhabitants of his brother’s lands, together with the whole tryb of Seill-Tormat, and some of the Seill-Torquill [the MacLeods of Lewis]’ followed his lead.¹⁰⁰ In an inversion of Carinish, it was the MacLeods, arrayed on the slopes of the hill, who held the advantage in terms of terrain.¹⁰¹ Gordon describes the battle as a ‘cruell and terrible skirmish, which continued all the day long’, but the MacDonalds ultimately managed to ‘overthrow’ the MacLeods, taking a number of important hostages, including Alasdair, the brother of Ruairidh Mòr.¹⁰² George Nicolson, writing to Sir Robert Cecil in February 1603, stated:

I hear that McLeod of Harris and Donald Gorme have fought and a thousand of the Clandonnell slain; yet their chief Donald Gorme victor.¹⁰³

Nicolson’s description may be somewhat exaggerated, but it imparts an impression of a very large scale battle indeed. An estimated muster of various clans in the Isles from c. 1595 places the strength of the MacDonalds of Sleat and the MacLeods of Harris at 1,500 and 560 respectively.¹⁰⁴ These estimates are not precise (the MacLeods may have fielded

⁹⁷ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 236.

⁹⁸ Nicolson, *The History of Skye*, 66; M.E.M. Donaldson, *Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands* (Paisley, 1923), 140-1.

⁹⁹ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 245; Mackenzie, *Outer Hebrides*, 206-7. The reputed battle-site of Coire na Creiche is in the Cuillin Hills, in the shadow of Bruach na Frìthe to the east. See NGR: NG 43856 25626.

¹⁰⁰ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 244-5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 1107.

¹⁰⁴ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 428-40. See Table 2.

as many as 800 men in Ireland and the muster of 560 does not include Glenelg), but they provide an impression of the relative military strength of the clans. Almost certainly outnumbered, the MacLeods took advantage of their superior position on the high ground and inflicted heavy casualties upon their MacDonald opponents, but eventually, they were overwhelmed and defeated.

On 29 June 1601, the ‘variance lately fallen out between’ Dòmhnall Gorm and Ruairidh Mòr was reported to the Privy Council, with the two parties ordered to cease hostilities.¹⁰⁵ Later on the 19 August, the feud was described in considerable, if fairly generic, detail, with both clans having reportedly engaged in

...violent persute of utheris be way of deid and oppin hostilitie, committing schamefull and barbarous slauchteris and murthouris, besydis oppin heirschipis, depredationis, and uther insolenceis, ather of thame aganis utheris...¹⁰⁶

On 22 August, both sides were ordered to ‘dissolve their forces and observe the King's peace’. Ruairidh Mòr was to surrender to Gilleasbuig, earl of Argyll, while Dòmhnall Gorm was to give himself up to George, Marquis of Huntly. Both clans were to ‘release peacefully all prisoners’.¹⁰⁷ The government-backed mediators do not seem to have been involved in the reconciliation process, as a truce was achieved through the mediation of Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig and MacLean of Coll.¹⁰⁸ The reconciliation was formalised by a bond made on 19 September 1601 at Eilean Donnan. This bond clearly suggests that Màiri MacLeod was at the centre of the feud:

...I [Dòmhnall Gorm] bind and oblies me my airis and assigneyis that albeit Marie McCloid lauchfull sister to ye said rorie McCloid of donbeggan entir and persew us be the forme of law anent quhatsumevir action or actions at ony tyme heireftir cuming. That then and In that case the samen sall nocht be haldin be vs or our foirsaidis to be na kynd of brak of the foirsaid appoyntment mayd zit ony part or portioun yairof at na tyme heireftir nor sall nocht quarrell the said rory Mcclloid for the samyn be vay of action or otherwyis.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 263.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹⁰⁸ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 245; *History of the Feuds*, 70. Presumably these two mediators were chosen to achieve a balanced arbitration, with MacDonald of Dunivaig backing MacDonald of Sleat, and MacLean of Coll supporting MacLeod of Harris.

¹⁰⁹ *Dunvegan Bk*, 46-7.

Màiri may have already threatened legal action against her ex-husband, presumably for his repudiation of her or for breaching their marriage contract. Future pursuit of Dòmhnall Gorm would jeopardise the resolution achieved by the two clan chiefs and neither party wanted Màiri to revive the dispute at a later date. It is possible that in order to ensure a settlement and the release of his imprisoned kin Ruairidh Mòr was forced to disown his sister, or at least leave her to fight her own battles. As pointed out by MacGregor, the MacDonalds' capture of several important MacLeod prisoners, including the chief's brother, meant they 'held the whip hand when it came to making the peace'.¹¹⁰ The presence of several MacKenzie witnesses in the bond, and the location of Eilean Donan, suggests they also desired an end to the feud, as well as official recognition of Dòmhnall Gorm's new marriage.¹¹¹ The formal, legal divorce between Dòmhnall Gorm and Màiri MacLeod was finally procured on 10 November 1605 and all administrative costs (amounting to 500 merks) were covered by MacKenzie,¹¹² again emphasising his personal interest in concluding the feud and solidifying the new marriage.¹¹³

Eight years later on 24 August 1609, another bond between the MacLeods and the MacDonalds was made, presided over by Andrew Knox, Bishop of the Isles, as part of the process of the Statutes of Iona:

...the saidis parteis considdering the godles and unhappie turnis done be other of thame yair freyndis serwandis tennentis dependaris and partakeris to utheris quhilkis frome yair hairtis ai and ilkame of thame now repentis. Thairfoir the saidis donald gorme mcdonald and Rorie mccloyid parteis above rehersit takand ye burdein on thame ilkane of yame for yair awin kin freyndis tennentis dependaris and aleyis to haif remittit frilie dischargit and forgevin Lyke be the tennor heirof fra yair hartis ffreilie remittis dischargis and forgevis ilkane of thame utheris and yair foirsaidis ffor all and quhatsumevir slauchteris Murthowris hairschippis spuylzeis of guidis and raising of fyre comittit be ather of thame agains utheris yair freyndis seruandis tennentis and dependaris at ony tyme preceeding the dat heirof Renunceand all actioun instance and persute quhatsumeivir criminall or ciuile yat can or may be competent in ather of yair personis or yair foirsaidis...¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ MacGregor, 'Statutes', 135.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² NRS: RD1/148, fol. 172v. My thanks to Dr MacCoinnich for this reference.

¹¹³ MacKenzie was steadily expanding his territory and influence by creating a web of affinities in the north-west, but was equally prepared to countenance military action, as shown by his feud with MacDonald of Glengarry around 1602 that culminated in the siege and destruction of Glengarry's Strome castle at Loch Carron.

¹¹⁴ *Dunvegan Bk*, 47-8.

Violence between the two clans had evidently not resumed following negotiations in 1601, and this agreement was founded upon mutual forgiveness rather than immediate disarmament. The bloodshed may have ended, but Knox feared the personal enmity had receded little in the intervening years. Future legal disputes were anticipated as Trotternish remained contested land, but this bond was Knox's attempt to decisively settle the bloodfeud. On a more symbolic level, MacGregor has argued that this bond may instead be deliberately anachronistic, especially when viewed in tandem with the Band of Iona, with the two chiefs 'turn[ing] the clock back to do what they had already done' to display the termination of the 'deidlie feidis' of the Highlands and Isles.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

Marriage was a genuine attempt to heal discord and build new bonds of kinship, and only hindsight makes the breakdown of the marital union between the MacDonalds and the MacLeods seem inevitable. Dòmhnall Gorm's (possibly second) repudiation of Màiri may have been the short-term incitement to war, but the dispute was the result of decades of tension over contested land in Skye. Marital links failed to patch over the cracks of this historic rivalry, and a lasting alliance was probably untenable if the issue of ownership of Trotternish went unresolved.

Much like the MacLean/MacDonald feud in the 1580s and 1590s, this was a high-level dispute between two of the most powerful chiefs in the Isles. Both Ruairidh Mòr and Dòmhnall Gorm were spirited individuals, and in some respects, this feud was a clash of personalities. Salvaging honour must have been a clear motivating factor for Ruairidh Mòr in the feud, and his righteous fury after defeat in Ireland in 1595 shows a chief operating in a milieu that placed much stock in the collective honour of the clan and the personal honour of its leader. Dòmhnall Gorm meanwhile had clear aspirations regarding the forfeited Lordship of the Isles, and was willing to draw the ire of other clans to achieve this goal. The involvement of the MacLeans, led by Lachlann Mòr, reinforced the perception of the MacLeods and the MacDonalds as natural rivals or enemies, as they found themselves consistently aligned in political opposition.

After the reconciliation in 1601 (or 1609), the two clans never again took to the battlefield to settle their disputes, but legal action over the contentious lands of Trotternish

¹¹⁵ MacGregor, 'Statutes', 136.

continued.¹¹⁶ Looking to the successes of MacKenzie of Kintail, the main beneficiary of this feud, and the disintegration of the MacLeods of Lewis, both parties were perhaps beginning to recognise the increasing need to cooperate with the royal government.¹¹⁷ After an evidently bloody feud, there may have been a mutual realisation that further conflict between such evenly-matched clans would only result in more ‘godles and unhappie turnis’, suffered most keenly by ordinary clan members.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 245; *Dunvegan Bk*, 38-9, 78-81, 216; MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility*, 150-

1.

¹¹⁷ MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 159-60.

¹¹⁸ *Dunvegan Bk*, 47-8.

Chapter 8: The Camerons, 1569-1614

As part of the expedition to the Western Isles by Andrew Knox, Bishop of the Isles, in the summer of 1609, which resulted in the famous Statutes of Iona,¹ the principal Hebridean chiefs agreed to the Band of Iona on 24 August 1609 in which they pledged their loyalty to the crown and promised to lead the ‘reformatioun of this our puir cuntrey’.² The Band identified ‘the unnaturall deidlie feidis quhilkis hes bene foisterit amangis us in this lait aig’ as the principal cause of the ‘grite miserie, barbaritie and povertie’ which had supposedly blighted the Western Isles. Importantly however, it noted that these ‘deidlie feidis’ had since been terminated.³ Over on the mainland however, in the Clan Cameron heartlands of Lochaber, an internecine feud was brewing, very much in the mould of the previous century or earlier. The bulk of this case study focuses on the period 1612-14 in which the clan was riven by violent struggle, but it will begin with an investigation of an earlier event: the assassination of the Cameron chief Dòmhnall Dubh c. 1569. The ramifications of this murder provide essential context for the later upheaval, as the culprits’ offspring challenged the next generation of Cameron chiefs.

In this period, the Camerons were based in Lochaber at the west end of the Great Glen, around Loch Eil, Loch Arkaig, and Loch Lochy. The earliest known charters belonging to the Camerons were granted by the MacDonalds of Lochlash: one by Gilleasbuig in November 1472, and two by his son Alasdair in July and August 1492.⁴ In 1472, Ailean was recorded as the captain of Clan Cameron and the constable of Castle Strome (which belonged to the MacDonalds of Lochalsh) and was due to marry Marion, the daughter of Aonghas, son of Alasdair MacDonald of Keppoch.⁵ The two charters from 1492 granted Eòghann, son of Ailean, 14 merklands in the lordship of Lochlash and 30 merklands of Lochiel.⁶ Thereafter, and doubtless before, Lochiel was the holding most closely associated with the chiefly lineage. On 24 October 1495, following the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493, these charters were confirmed by King James IV.⁷ By 1570/1, the Camerons’ lands are recorded as including the 10 merkland of Glen Nevis, the 10 merkland of Letterfinlay, Stronaba, Lendally, and the £20 land of ‘Niknodort’, all in the

¹ For a summary of some of the conflicting views of the Statutes’ impact, see MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 111 n.1; MacInnes, *Clanship*, 84 n. 20.

² MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 114, 136.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*, 162-4, 194-5, 197-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 163-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 194-5, 197-9; *The Lochiel Inventory*, ed. Jean Munro (Edinburgh, 2000), 12.

⁷ *Lochiel Inventory*, 12.

lordship of Lochaber.⁸ In February 1534, the Camerons became tenants of George Gordon, the earl of Huntly,⁹ an arrangement that generally continued with their successors for the rest of the century.¹⁰ As a result, the Camerons became increasingly integrated with the clans of the central Highlands, without fully leaving the MacDonalds' sphere of influence, as shown by the Camerons' support of the Clanranald in the 1540s.¹¹ Indeed, a serious breach in the Camerons' relationship with the Gordon earls of Huntly must have emerged in 1546 when the Cameron chief, Eòghann mac Ailein, was executed by Huntly for his participation in *Blàr nan Lèine* in 1544 and subsequent raids.¹² The Camerons' relatively recent and fragile alignment with Huntly, following their long association with the MacDonalds, gave the earl of Argyll a foothold to supplant his rival Huntly and exert his influence over the Lochaber clan.

The genesis for the eventual violence that erupted between 1612-14 lies at least forty years earlier with the assassination of the Cameron captain Dòmhnall Dubh c. 1569 by members of his own clan.¹³ The nature of this killing is extremely murky. Donald Gregory, and more recently John Stewart, argued that the main conspirators were the Cameron branches of Erracht and, to a lesser extent, Kinlochiel.¹⁴ These clan branches (shown below in Appendix 2.2) began with Eòghann and Iain Dubh, the younger sons of Eòghann mac Ailein (d. 1546), born of his second marriage with the daughter of Lachlann Mackintosh.¹⁵ Eòghann mac Ailein's first-born son Dòmhnall seems to have died during his own lifetime, but he was succeeded by his grandson, Eòghann Beag, son of Dòmhnall. His chiefship was soon disputed by his uncles, Eòghann of Erracht and Iain Dubh of Kinlochiel. On 27 September 1550, Eòghann, the Captain of Clan Cameron, along with fifteen accomplices, was accused of the 'cruel slaughter' of his uncle Iain Dubh mac Eòghainn.¹⁶ When Eòghann Beag, son of Dòmhnall, died childless in 1553/4,¹⁷ his younger brother Dòmhnall Dubh (d. 1569) succeeded.

⁸ RSS, Vol. VI, 198.

⁹ The Camerons also had close marital ties with the Campbells of Cawdor during this early period. See *The Book of the Thaness of Cawdor*, ed. The Spalding Club (Edinburgh, 1859), 129-30, 160-1.

¹⁰ *Lochiel Inventory*, 17. In 1563, Huntly was forfeited and the Camerons' lands were taken over by the crown. See *Ibid.*, 16-7.

¹¹ Cathcart, *Kinship*, 185 n. 99; *Supra*: 137-9.

¹² *The Mackintosh Muniments 1442-1820*, ed. Henry Patron (Edinburgh, 1903), 16, no. 41; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 184.

¹³ RSS, Vol. VI, 198; RPC, Vol. II, 597; Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. I, part 2, 33.

¹⁴ Gregory, *History*, 202-3; Stewart, *Camerons*, 269-76.

¹⁵ *Chronicle of Mackintosh*, 37; Stewart, *Camerons*, 269-276.

¹⁶ Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. I, 355.

¹⁷ RSS, Vol. IV, 411.

On 1 November 1564, shortly after he had been confirmed in the clan's estates on 6 March 1563/4 by Queen Mary,¹⁸ Dòmhnall Dubh appeared before the Privy Council to negotiate a truce with some of his relatives: Somhairle mac Dhòmhnail mhic Ailein, the tutor of Glen Nevis, and Alasdair, the heir apparent to the Glen Nevis branch. Both parties had 'divers actionis and caussis to persew aganis utheris', but these grievances were not specified.¹⁹ On 3 November, Dòmhnall Dubh was ordered to 'remane in fre ward' in Edinburgh and find surety of 2,000 merks for his future good behaviour.²⁰ Later that month on 27 November, Dòmhnall Dubh found a cautioner in Iain Grant of Freuchie, and pledged before the Council to 'keip guid reull and ordour in the cuntre'.²¹ However, in his absence, other claimants to the Cameron chiefship had begun exerting control over the clan, and between 1567 and 1569, Iain Dubh, son of Eòghann of Erracht and grandson of Eòghann mac Ailein, completed the coup by masterminding the assassination of Dòmhnall Dubh.²²

When Dòmhnall Dubh was killed, his son²³ Ailean was a minor. Allegedly, his supporters sent him to Mull to be fostered with his maternal relations, the MacLeans of Duart, for his own safety.²⁴ The period until his return to Lochaber in 1577 is remembered in Cameron tradition as anarchic, with many apocryphal stories about An Tàillear Dubh, 'the Black Tailor', a warrior with uncertain loyalties.²⁵ Many of these stories may be inventions or embellishments, but they nevertheless provide an impressionistic view of the disorder in this period. By 1570, the leadership of the Camerons does appear to have split into at least two factions: some supported Dòmhnall mac Ailein mhic Eòghainn, probably another grandson of Eòghann mac Ailein allied with the Erracht faction, while others backed the son of Eòghann Beag (d. 1553/4), possibly An Tàillear Dubh. Although there was clear division within the clan, it was not necessarily manifested in bloodshed. On 15 April 1572, Dòmhnall Dubh's brother, another Iain Dubh, initiated judicial proceedings against 25 Camerons apparently involved in the killing of Dòmhnall Dubh. All were declared rebels.²⁶ On 9 July, Dòmhnall Dubh's cousin, Iain Dubh, son of Eòghann of Erracht and grandson of Eòghann mac Ailein, was charged with his murder, along with 34

¹⁸ *RMS*, Vol. IV, 347.

¹⁹ *RPC*, Vol. I, 291.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

²¹ *RPC*, Vol. I, 294.

²² Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. I, part 2, 33. Considering their earlier feud with Dòmhnall Dubh, it seems likely that the Glen Nevis branch was involved in the murder.

²³ Gregory asserts Ailean was Dòmhnall's nephew rather than son, yet Stewart has pointed out an entry in the *Register of the Privy Seal* that names Ailean as Dòmhnall's son. See *RSS*, Vol. VI, 198; Gregory, *History*, 203, n. 1; Stewart, *Camerons*, 272-3.

²⁴ Gregory, *History*, 202-3. The Camerons' lands had been granted in ward to Iain Caddell of 'Aslowne' on 3 January 1570/1, until Ailean could be confirmed as heir of his father. See *RSS*, Vol. VI, 198.

²⁵ Stewart, *Camerons*, 34, 36-7, 275.

²⁶ *Mackintosh Muniments*, 33.

other individuals.²⁷ None of those charged in July appear in the list of accused in April, suggesting the sedition against Dòmhnall Dubh had been fairly widespread within the clan. In the July charge, Ùisdean Fraser of Lovat and Lachlann Mackintosh were both fined for the non-appearance of these individuals before the court of law, perhaps indicating their support for the overthrowing of Dòmhnall Dubh.²⁸

In early 1577, two other Camerons, Iain Cam and Alasdair Dubh, both supporters of the Erracht faction, were arrested by the earl of Atholl and languished in Blair Castle.²⁹ On 26 February 1577, they were brought to court in Edinburgh by Atholl's servant, where they were denounced for the murder of Dòmhnall Dubh by his 'brothers and other friends'.³⁰ These proceedings reveal that the earl of Argyll was probably supporting the Erracht faction. On 1 March 1577, Alasdair Dubh was in ward in Edinburgh, and the earl of Argyll had agreed to act as surety for him and his brother, Iain Cam.³¹ They appear to have escaped or been released from their ward, as on 1 January 1578 Argyll was charged £1,000 when all parties failed to appear in court.³² This period of uncertainty within the Clan Cameron may have provided Argyll with an opportunity to exert his influence over a kindred that had been aligned with the earl of Huntly since 1534.

The coming of age of Ailean, son of Dòmhnall Dubh, must have prompted the rounding up of those suspected or accused of involvement in Dòmhnall Dubh's murder. By January 1578, Ailean had returned to Lochaber. To signal his homecoming and formal succession, Ailean gave a bond of assurance to Mackintosh, describing himself as 'chief and captain of Clan Cameron' and pledging the safety of certain Camerons, including the Glen Nevis branch, in 'the lands that they possessed and manured last within the bounds of Mamore and Lochaber'. He also promised to maintain the sons of Iain Dubh of Erracht, the man charged with the murder of Dòmhnall Dubh, in their current 'rowmis' (territory).³³ The fact that this bond was given to Mackintosh is another indication that he had supported the Erracht faction after Dòmhnall Dubh's death. Whether he was an active conspirator in the assassination itself is more difficult to prove. Significantly, on 11 June 1577, Iain Dubh

²⁷ Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. I, part 2, 33. In the complaint, Dòmhnall Dubh is recorded as the Captain of Clanranald. This must be an error as Iain Muideartach was still the Captain of Clanranald until at least 1576/7. The close alliance between the Clanranald and the Camerons may have led to the confusion.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Stewart claims Eòghann mac Ailein's second marriage was to a daughter of Mackintosh, which would certainly give the new Mackintosh chief, his son, a vested interest in the claim of his nephew, Iain Dubh. See Stewart, *Camerons*, 271-2.

²⁹ *RPC*, Vol. II, 587-8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 597.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 713.

³² *Ibid.*, 661-2.

³³ NRS: GD176/74; Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, 'The Camerons of Letterfinlay, styled Macmartin', *TGSI*, 17 (1890-1), 33-6.

of Erracht made a bond of manrent with the earl of Argyll, providing further indication that Argyll too had backed the Erracht faction.³⁴ Overall, a fragile truce had been established within the Clan Cameron. Later intervention by Argyll and Huntly provided an opportunity for Iain Dubh of Erracht's son, Iain Bodach, to challenge the incumbent Ailean.

In the short-term, the main cause of conflict within the clan was a struggle for overlordship over the Camerons between the seventh earl of Argyll and the sixth earl (later first Marquis) of Huntly. The Camerons' association with Huntly had been renewed on 5 March 1590, when Ailean made a bond of manrent with the earl,³⁵ and in 1591

...Huntly sent Ailein M'konilduy [Cameron] into Badenoch against the Clanchattan, and, after a sharp skirmish, they fled and killed 50 of them, with the loss of as many of his own.³⁶

However, the Camerons' powerbase in Lochaber also lay within the Campbells' sphere of influence. In May 1591, Ailean made a bond of protection and manrent with Donnchadh Campbell of Glenorchy 'against all persons' except for the king, the earl of Huntly (for Ailean) and the earl of Argyll (for both Ailean and Donnchadh).³⁷

A contest over their loyalty was emerging and a critical point of convergence was the battle of Glenlivet on 3 October 1594. Before the battle, the Camerons were in Huntly's company, and Ailean was chosen as envoy to 'move Argyll for peace or to spare the spoil and slaughter of his poor tenants'.³⁸ On one level, Ailean was a natural choice considering his connections on both sides, but it may also have been a test of loyalty. Despite Ailean's efforts, Argyll refused to withdraw and reportedly

...granted leave to MacKendowy, holding his lands "on" Huntly, to remain at home, on condition that he and his followers give no support to Huntly.³⁹

What Ailean and the Camerons did next is unclear. They may have tried to adopt a neutral stance by returning to Lochaber, but Huntly would probably have regarded that more as open defiance than neutrality. One contemporary report claims Ailean actually switched

³⁴ *AT*, VII, 27.

³⁵ *Lochiel Inventory*, 115. In 1592, their alliance was renewed after the murder of the earl of Moray. See Cathcart, *Kinship*, 195; *Spalding Miscellany*, Vol. IV, 248.

³⁶ *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 213. In 1593, a government report confirms Ailean had recently assisted Huntly militarily against Mackintosh. The MacDonalds of Keppoch and the MacDonalds of Glengarry were also listed as Huntly's adherents. See *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 255; *Lochiel Inventory*, 115.

³⁷ *Taymouth Bk*, 247-8.

³⁸ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 450.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 453.

sides to join Argyll's force,⁴⁰ but this may have been done against his will – another report states that Ailean initially came to Badenoch with Argyll, but then escaped 'with six and himselfe and paste to Huntley, wher his company mett him'.⁴¹ One of the later narratives of the battle of Glenlivet says Ailean, 'chiefe of the Clan Cameron, a race of Highlanders in Lochabre' was present in Huntly's vanguard.⁴² At Glenlivet, the Camerons probably maintained their traditional ties with Huntly, but it is abundantly clear that their allegiance was actively sought by Argyll.

Over the next few years, the Camerons conducted several attacks on neighbouring clans and families,⁴³ including a cattle raid on Iain Ferguson of Derculich in Atholl in 1602.⁴⁴ It is difficult to say if the Camerons were raiding on their own initiative or being compelled by Huntly as in 1591. The Camerons of Glen Nevis participated in at least two of these incursions, one of which – a raid on Glenalmond in 1595 – was conducted by them alone. Considering their past quarrels with the Lochiel family, this could imply that Ailean was struggling to restrain the Glen Nevis branch.⁴⁵ Ailean found diplomatic success in July 1598 when he reached an agreement with the Mackintoshes over the contested lands of Glen Loy and Loch Arkaig,⁴⁶ although this land dispute would later be revived in 1617.⁴⁷ In this agreement, bonds of manrent and maintenance were exchanged, yet more significantly, the Cameron chief agreed to support Mackintosh in any future disputes between Mackintosh and Huntly.⁴⁸ The divide between the Camerons and Huntly was widening. By 1603, the clan as a whole were considered rebels by central government, a status shared notably with the MacGregors, and in apparent solidarity with that clan, some Camerons fought on their side at the battle of Glen Fruin in that year.⁴⁹ This further indicates a growing shift in allegiance towards the earl of Argyll as the MacGregors were firmly under his sway and allegedly attacked the Colquhouns at Glen Fruin at his behest.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 450. Argyll may have feared treachery from the Camerons as Bowes states that he 'thinks good to carry them with him that they may not hurt him'.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 457.

⁴² 'Account of the Battle of Balrinnes', 263.

⁴³ *RPC*, Vol. V, 19-20, 498; *RPC*, Vol. VI, 93, 444, 487, 495.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, 495. The Camerons escaped with 155 cows and oxen.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 93, 495.

⁴⁶ Bestowed by Queen Mary upon Mackintosh in 1567, he now 'wadesett' the lands to Ailean for 6,000 merks. See NRS: GD176/84/85/187; *Lochiel Inventory*, 21. To trace the later conveyancing of these lands, see *Lochiel Inventory*, 21-5.

⁴⁷ NRS: GD176/268.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*; Cathcart, *Kinship*, 197-8.

⁴⁹ *RPC*, Vol. VI, 785. In 1622, two Camerons were executed on Castle Hill in Edinburgh for their participation in the battle and subsequent raids with the MacGregors. See *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 537-8.

⁵⁰ *Supra*: 165-70.

On 16 February 1609, the earl of Argyll obtained a sasine of the lands and barony of Lochiel, apparently purchased from Eachann MacLean of Lochbuie.⁵¹ According to Donald Gregory, Argyll was ‘eager to extend the influence of his family, more particularly where this could be done at the expense of his rival, the Marquis of Huntly, to whose party the Clanchameron were attached’.⁵² His next move supports this view. With his legal right settled, he did not seize or occupy the lands, but supplanted Huntly as landlord by reconfirming the Camerons in their territory as his own tenants and vassals. Writing in September 1613, James Primrose, Clerk of the Privy Council, states:

The Marquest of Huntlie being informit heirof, and taking offence that Aileine should acknowledge ony superiour within Lochquhaber bot him, he delt with Aileine to renunce the securitie he had tane of the Erll of Ergyll, and to take ane new right and securitie of the same landis fra him. Aileine refusit this conditioun with mony protestationis that, althocht he held that xx merk land of the Erll of Ergyle, yitt that sould be no prejudice to his obedience and service to the Marques of Huntley, bot that he sould continew asl loyall to the house of Huntley as him self and his foirbearis had formarlie bene. This ansuer nowayes contentit the Marques; who, having some uther discontentmentis aganis Aileine, resolved altogidder to undo him.⁵³

Huntly’s stratagem was to ‘renew the dissensions’ which had riven the Clan Cameron during the minority of Ailean, the current chief, and to that end, he approached some of Ailean’s kinsmen – Iain Bodach (son of Iain Dubh, murderer of Dòmhnall Dubh) and Alasdair of Glen Nevis – with the offer of investment in Ailean’s lands in Lochaber.⁵⁴ The precise timing of Huntly’s offer is difficult to pinpoint, but there are two obvious junctures: September 1610 and February 1612.

The Camerons had recently been at feud with the Clanranald over the lands of Knoydart, but they were reconciled before the Privy Council on 28 June 1610, as part of a general summons of Highland chiefs, soon formalised as an annual occurrence.⁵⁵ On 14 August 1610, the Camerons were ordered by the Privy Council to join the pursuit of the

⁵¹ *Lochiel Inventory*, 29; *Memoirs of Sir Ewen Cameron of Locheill*, ed. James Macknight (Edinburgh, 1842), 47. According to James Primrose, Argyll obtained the sasine through a fortuitous discovery in his ‘chartour kist’. See *RPC*, Vol. X, 818.

⁵² Gregory, *History*, 340-1.

⁵³ *RPC*, Vol. X, 818-9.

⁵⁴ Gregory, *History*, 340-1; *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *RPC*, Vol. VIII, 760; MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 120-2.

outlawed and proscribed Clan Gregor.⁵⁶ A later letter from James VI, written in August 1611, relates that Ailean's service against the MacGregors had been incentivised by the promise that he would be confirmed as a tenant of the crown in lands which 'pertained formerly to...McIntosh and now by his Majestys gift to Sir Alexander Hay his secretary'.⁵⁷ On 24 September 1610, it was reported that some of the Cameron clansmen had refused to assist in this service, claiming that they were 'favourers of the said Clan [Gregor]', a position substantiated by the Cameron presence at Glen Fruin in 1603. However, assuming Huntly had approached Iain Bodach and Alasdair of Glen Nevis by this point, this ideological opposition may have been mere pretext for general insubordination against their chief. Whether conscientious objectors or discontented clansmen, these Camerons were ordered to appear before the Privy Council under pain of rebellion.⁵⁸ On 28 May 1611, the remainder of Clan Cameron still loyal to Ailean joined with Campbell of Glenorchy and Campbell of Lawers with the aim of capturing MacGregors and handing them over to the earl of Argyll. Ailean and his followers were now clearly established as Argyll's agents. During these efforts, the Camerons and their associates, the MacDonalds of Keppoch, discovered some of the 'principal ringleaders' of the Clan Gregor were under the protection of the Clan Chattan and the Macphersons in Badenoch. Ragnall, the heir of the Keppoch chief, led an expedition into Badenoch, but the Clan Chattan and Macphersons anticipated his arrival and 'rose all in arms to the number of 300 men', capturing Ragnall and twelve of his kin.⁵⁹ The Macphersons and the Clan Chattan were adherents of the earl of Huntly,⁶⁰ and therefore their shelter of the Clan Gregor and obstruction of the MacDonalds was perhaps at the behest of the Marquis.

Perhaps in response to Huntly's obstructiveness, the earl of Argyll's claim to the lands of Lochiel was given royal approval. In a letter to Ailean of Lochiel, dated 3 August 1611, King James states

...the Earle of Argile had submitted his clame that he had to the lands of Locheil [sic] to his Majesty in which his Majesty promised him all manner of justice and that if his right to them was not good that he should be a mean of making it better...⁶¹

⁵⁶ *RPC*, Vol. IX, 47; MacGregor, 'Political History', 1.

⁵⁷ *Lochiel Inventory*, 38.

⁵⁸ *RPC*, Vol. IX, 66.

⁵⁹ *RPC*, Vol. XI, 255. The heir of Keppoch managed to escape under cover of darkness.

⁶⁰ As we shall see however, the Gordons and the Mackintoshes were fiercely competitive, which sometimes led to hostilities.

⁶¹ *Lochiel Inventory*, 38.

The king implored Ailean to ‘prosequite his service [against the MacGregors] with all diligence and fidelity according to the directions of the Earle of Argyle his Majestys Lieutennant’.⁶²

By 25 February 1612, the mutinous clansmen led by Iain Bodach and Alasdair of Glen Nevis had become open rebels against Ailean Cameron of Lochiel. This is the most likely point for Huntly to have made a formal offer of investment and support, while Ailean and Argyll negotiated the formal terms of their ‘Principall Articles of Aggreement’, later concluded on 22 August 1612.⁶³ According to Ailean and his supporters, the rebels’ insurrection was founded upon their displeasure at having ‘randerit thair obedience to his Majestie’, which had resulted in the Cameron’s involvement in the pursuit of their ‘friends’, the Clan Gregor and ‘all broken men’. Alignment with the ‘rebellious lymmairis of the Heylandis and Illis’ would have made them

...the more able undir thair patrocinie and protection to have continewit in thair iniquitie and wickedness, fra the quhilk thay feir now to be reclaimed be thame.⁶⁴

It is important to note that this complaint, made by Ailean, was probably intended to smear his political opponents as supporters of the vilified Clan Gregor, deflecting scrutiny away from his own chiefship. Yet it may be true that some within the Clan Cameron genuinely feared that their way of life was threatened by their chief’s recent decision to pursue the MacGregors on behalf of the crown, as this may have precluded future raids undertaken by the clan.⁶⁵ Crucially, he had ‘betrayed’ his allies, the MacGregors, whom the rebels continued to support. On 19 May 1613, Alasdair Cameron of Glen Nevis was accused of resetting certain MacGregors, a charge also levelled at various Macphersons and Mackintoshes.⁶⁶ Although Erracht and Glen Nevis had ulterior motives for deposing

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 29-30. Ailean was to pay Argyll 4,100 merks (the sum paid by Argyll to MacLean of Lochbuie for the sasine) for investment in the barony of Lochiel, a sum that would be repaid in the event of his eviction. Ailean was obliged to pay a yearly sum of 100 merks, and grant Argyll ‘31 years tack of the whole woods grouing upon the forementioned lands, reserving to him and his tennents wood for building of houses and fisher boats’. The yearly rate increased exponentially by the second half of the seventeenth century. See *Ibid.*, 29-35.

⁶⁴ *RPC*, Vol. IX, 337.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. V, 19-20, 498; Vol. VI, 93, 444, 487, 495. Two other internal clan rebellions occurred in 1610 and 1612 involving the Clanranald and the MacKinnons of Strathardle. A similar situation prompted the Keppoch Murder of 1663, in which the ‘evangelical efforts’ of Alasdair MacDonald of Keppoch and his brother Raghnaid ‘to turn their clansmen away from careers as caterans’ resulted in their assassination. See *Supra*: 69-70; Macinnes, ‘Lochaber’, 7.

⁶⁶ *RPC*, Vol. X, 54, 51-5.

Ailean, this does not preclude the possibility that they opposed his chiefship on the basis of their conscience and morality.

We are fortunate to possess a report on the outbreak of violence between the Camerons provided by James Primrose, Clerk of the Privy Council, in September 1613. This is an account brimming with the kind of anecdotal detail usually reserved for traditional clan histories. According to Primrose, the Cameron chief was quick to react to the rebellion within the ranks, and met with Iain Bodach and Alasdair of Glen Nevis to discuss their grievances in apparent good will:

...seameing to tak no offence aganis thame for taking of his land over his heade, he shew to thame that he undirstoode perfytelie that thay wer induceit thairunto aganis thair willis be the Marques, and thairfoir he desyrit of thame that thay wald gif over thair landis agane to him; and he doubtit not bot shortlie he sould gif unto the Marques satisfioun.⁶⁷

The rebels promised to renounce their claims, but when Ailean pressed for a pledge in writing, they refused, requesting he visit Huntly and reconcile with him:

Aileine, lyke ane auld subtile fox, persaving thair drift, and being als cairfull to preserve his heade as they wer curious to twyne him frome it, he tooke the mater to advisement, pairtit with thame in outward showe of good termes, and come to this burgh to advise what course he sould follow oute to come be his land agane.⁶⁸

In Edinburgh, Ailean received intelligence that the rebels had arranged another meeting, this time with murderous intent, hoping to kill him and definitively ‘secure thame selffis in the land’. The Cameron chief secretly returned to Lochaber to muster support from those still loyal to him. Raising a force of 120 men, Ailean ordered them to hide in a forest half a mile from the agreed meeting place; meanwhile he would meet with his rebellious kin accompanied by only six men. Even at this point, Ailean apparently still hoped for a peaceful solution, but he had prepared a lethal contingency plan should negotiations turn sour. At the meeting point, when the rebels saw Ailean with his small retinue of six men, they clearly did not expect any foul play, and immediately they ‘all brak at him, resolveing then to haif his lyffe’:

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 819.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

[Ailean fled] hard by the wode quhair his ambusche lay. Thay follow him that same way with schoutheing and shoiting of arrowis; and, when thay ar all by, the ambusche comes furthe. Aileine persaveing, he turnis, and, thay upoun the bak, and he upoun the face, makis ane cruell and bloodie onsett upoun thame, slayis tuentie of the cheif and principallis of thame, takis aucht prisonnaris, and sufferis the rest to eschaip.⁶⁹

The two main leaders of the rebels, Iain Bodach and Alasdair of Glen Nevis, were among those slain.⁷⁰ Now leaderless, the internal challenge to Ailean's chiefship was effectively over. Perhaps surprisingly, an element of empathy creeps into Primrose's account, as he seemingly regards Ailean's actions as justifiable, possibly because they were an example of strong lordship. He states that Ailean, having regained possession of his lands, had offered 'ane lessone to the rest of his kin who ar alyve in quhat forme thay sall carye thame selffis to thair cheif heirefter'.⁷¹

In contrast to Primrose's approving tone, on 16 December 1613, the Privy Council made an incensed denunciation of Ailean Cameron who had

...of laite committit most detestable and cruell murthouris and slauchteris upoun diverse of his Majesteis peciable and good subjectis, and having treasounable rissin fyre, brynt houssis, cornis, and barnis, besydis diverse utheris insolencyis and villannyis committit be him, to the offence of God, contempt of his Majestie, and misregaird of law and justice, for the quhilk he is denunceit rebell and put to the horne...⁷²

The charge also noted that Ailean was a man naturally 'inclynnit to murthour, treacherie and rebellion', who had 'enterit in blood with his awne kynnismen and freindis'.⁷³ This overlooks the fact that Ailean initially tried to resolve this situation through diplomacy at great personal risk, and while it is factually accurate that Ailean killed his kinsmen, he was arguably acting in self-defence.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 819-20.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 185, 187.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 820. A later history written by John Drummond in the first-half of the eighteenth century downplays Ailean's deadly ambush: 'He was obliged in his youth to Chastize Severall of the heads of the tribes of his own Clan for ther Insolent & Undutifull behaviour, with Severity'. See *Lochiel Inventory*, 11.

⁷² *RPC*, Vol. X, 184. The great irony of this case study is the retroactive portrayal of the Cameron rebels as 'peciable and good subjectis' when only a few months earlier their mutiny had been denounced by the Privy Council. See *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV, 654.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 185, 187. By 1617, Ailean's crimes had grown to include 'sorceryis'. See *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 207.

A bounty of £1,000, dead or alive, was placed upon Ailean's head, payable by the Marquis of Huntly who was tasked with leading the hunt for the Cameron chief.⁷⁴ Uptake for the pursuit was slow, with 'divers personis of all rankis' failing to join with Huntly. On 7 July 1614, the Privy Council enacted punitive measures to compel the noncommittal, granting the earl of Enzie (Huntly's eldest son) the right to fine those who failed to appear in his host.⁷⁵ On 8 August, a number of prominent chiefs were charged not only for their failure to join Enzie's pursuit of Ailean but also for sheltering him. The named chiefs – MacLean of Duart, MacLeod of Harris, MacKinnon of Strathardle, MacLean of Coll, and MacLean of Lochbuie – had gone beyond neutrality and were now actively assisting the outlawed Camerons.⁷⁶ The widespread sympathetic support from neighbouring chiefs, perhaps encouraged by the earl of Argyll,⁷⁷ but more likely stemming from a sense of natural justice and solidarity, must have hampered Enzie's campaign, yet one source claims the Gordons eventually met with success. According to Sir Robert Gordon, Ailean surrendered to Huntly and was imprisoned in Inverness, before being released 'vpon sufficient souertie and caution for keeping of the king's peace in tyme coming'.⁷⁸ This submission is not recorded in any other sources and Gordon's 'close connections with the House of Huntly' cast some doubt on the veracity of his account.⁷⁹

On 27 July 1617, Ailean of Lochiel was again recorded as 'unrelaxed from a horning', and on 31 July, any support of the Cameron chief or his associates was forbidden.⁸⁰ The Camerons as a whole remained outlawed for many more years. On 21 March 1621, the Privy Council wrote to the king claiming 'the whole Ilia and continent nixt adiacent ar in a maner reduceit to obedience, and no publict dissobedyence profest bot be Aileine M^ceanduy'.⁸¹ Several government-sponsored expeditions led by Mackintosh and Huntly failed. Various other clans, including the MacDonalds of Sleat, the MacKenzies of Kintail, and the MacLeods of Harris, made little effort to join the pursuit of the Camerons, presumably from a sense of solidarity, a lack of proper motivation, or a combination of both. Finally, on 28 June 1624, over a decade after he was first declared a

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. X, 188-9, 185-6; *HP*, Vol. III, 139-40; *Memorials of the Earls of Haddington*, Vol. II, ed. William Fraser (Edinburgh, 1889), 75-6.

⁷⁵ *RPC*, Vol. X, 250. The extent of the penalty was determined by their social rank: earl (£1,000); lord (1,000 merks); baron (£500); landed gentleman (500 merks); and yeoman 'according to thair habilitie' (£100).

⁷⁶ *RPC*, Vol. X, 707.

⁷⁷ Gregory, *History*, 346. These chiefs, especially the MacLeans, were typically aligned with Argyll. On 16 May 1588, Huntly was given a commission to pursue the Camerons, while Argyll and MacLean of Duart were especially warned 'against receiving or resetting any of the forenamed rebels', suggesting they were known supporters of the Camerons at this point. See NRS: GD176/150.

⁷⁸ *Earldom of Sutherland*, 294-5.

⁷⁹ Barry Robertson, *Lordship and Power in the North of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2011), 44-5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 204-5; NRS: GD176/266.

⁸¹ *HP*, Vol. III, 313.

rebel, Ailean Cameron of Lochiel was granted remission by King James.⁸² Tension between the Camerons, Gordons, and Mackintoshes continued in the following years, fluctuating in severity, but the Camerons were no longer the *bêtes noires* of Scotland.

Conclusion

The exceptionally long-lived Ailean Cameron of Lochiel, who was ‘from his cradle to his grave, involved in a labyrinth of troubles’ finally died in April 1647.⁸³ A later poem written by John Drummond for Ailean’s descendant Dòmhnall Cameron of Lochiel (d.1748) presents Ailean as the last of a dying breed, too preoccupied with military affairs to recognise the harm being done to his clan:

But Ailein, Loe! Black Donald’s warlike Son,
By too much Bravery almost is Undone:
Like a bold Lyon, with resistless paws,
His foes He oppresses, but provokes the Laws
The Royall gifts of Kings is torn away,
And On’s Estate Rapacious Neighbours prey!
Till his Wise Son did Calm the Noble Heate
And gather’d up the Wracks of his Estate!⁸⁴

Ailean’s response to the internal challenge he faced certainly indicates a ruthless streak, and that he was willing to use violence when necessary. Furthermore, although the kin-based nature of Highland society fostered strong bonds between kindreds and clan members, it could also generate disorder and conflict. Neither did familial bonds preclude the use of violence, yet while Ailean did ultimately resort to bloodshed to suppress the pretensions of his opponents, it was arguably a measured response used with considerable restraint. The ambush of his kin was a limited engagement, and there is no indication of reprisals being conducted against supporters of the rebellious branches – his objective had already been achieved. Ailean’s actions cannot be condoned, but they were undoubtedly very different from the kind of brutal fratricide allegedly perpetrated by the warring brothers of Clan Donald of Sleat in the wake of the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles.⁸⁵ This case study further emphasises the difficulty in reducing conflict to one cause – a bloodfeud, a land dispute, and a succession crisis were all factors in the violence that

⁸² *Lochiel Inventory*, 17-18.

⁸³ Stewart, *Camerons*, 36, 51. If we assume he was in his mid-teens when he returned in 1577, he would have been at least 85 years old when he died.

⁸⁴ *Lochiel Inventory*, 8-9, 120.

⁸⁵ *HP*, Vol. I, 65-6.

occurred. Another major contributing factor was the contest between Argyll and Huntly for overlordship in Lochaber, which saw the two magnates exploit internal divisions and instigate warfare within the Clan Cameron.

Chapter 9: The 'Islay Rising', 1614-5

Between 1614 and 1615, the ancient MacDonald stronghold of Dunivaig Castle was besieged several times by both crown agents and various members of Clan Donald of Dunivaig. These sieges constitute the major military action of the 'Islay Rising' led by Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig, an attempt at challenging the Campbell hegemony on the west coast and restoring the fortunes of the Clan Donald. This episode of Highland history has been given comparatively more attention than other events in this period. It was discussed in detail by Donald Gregory in 1836 and more recently by Edward J. Cowan and David Stevenson, the former describing it as a 'sordid story of treachery'.¹ Gregory's general narrative remains strong, and Stevenson's focus on one key participant, Colla Ciotach (the father of Alasdair MacColla), provides a useful perspective, but there remains scope for further assessment with an emphasis on warfare and military affairs. Even as a standalone study, it offers much in relation to the conduct of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles, especially in contrast to the military power of the government. When viewed within the broader chronological context of 1544-1615, it also allows the historian to trace continuity and change in Highland military tactics, the mentalities of the Gaelic nobility, and the government approach to the Highlands and Isles.

In the early seventeenth century, the MacDonalds of Duniviag, riven by infighting and mounting debts, lost their ancestral base of Islay. Their chief, Aonghas, first surrendered Dunivaig Castle to the crown in 1605, before renouncing ownership of the whole island in favour of Sir Iain Campbell of Cawdor on 1 January 1612, in exchange for 6,000 merks.² Kintyre, another ancestral possession, was acquired by the Campbells in 1607.³ In September 1612, Ragnall MacDonald of Dunluce (the future earl of Antrim) then bought out Cawdor's claim, with royal approval, but his 'Irish' form of landlordism alienated his new tenants in Islay.⁴ Recovery of the clan's rapidly dwindling patrimony was a foremost concern for many of the kindred's leading men, not least Sir Seumas, the eldest son of Aonghas. He had usurped the leadership of the clan from his father in 1598,⁵

¹ Gregory, *History*, 349-90; Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 34-49; Cowan, 'The Campbell Acquisition of Islay', 154.

² *HP*, Vol. III, 91; *Thanes of Cawdor*, 226-7.

³ Angus Matheson, 'Documents connected with the trial of Sir James MacDonald of Islay', *The Gaelic Society of Glasgow*, Vol. V, 209.

⁴ *RPC*, Vol. X, 13-14; Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 30-1.

⁵ *CSPS*, Vol. XIII, 255-7; *History of the Feuds*, 66; 'Diarey of Robert Birrel', 47; Matheson, 'Trial of Sir James MacDonald', 208, 213-8.

but was later captured and imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle in 1604.⁶ Although Sir Seumas could do little to help the clan while behind bars in Edinburgh, some of his kinsmen shared his aspiration.

By 1614, Islay had been nominally controlled by Ragnall MacDonald of Dunluce for two years, but the upper echelons of the MacDonalds of Dunivaig maintained a presence on the island in this period of transition. Dunivaig Castle itself was lightly garrisoned by a handful of crown agents associated with Andrew Knox, Bishop of the Isles. In May 1610, he had been named Steward of the Isles and had adopted Dunivaig as his headquarters.⁷ Sensing an opportunity to easily reclaim the castle, a small MacDonald company commanded by Ragnall Òg, the illegitimate son of Aonghas MacDonald of Dunivaig, launched an attack on Dunivaig in March 1614. According to the minutes of a Privy Council meeting in April 1614, Ragnall Òg

...a vagabound fellow...come latelie to Yla, and finding the House [Dunivaig Castle] to be but slenderlie kept, resolved to surpryse and tak the same: And for this effect, he and his complices, being four or fyve in nomber, retered thame selves to ane wood, neare by the House, whair that made some laderes, and with thame, one day, airtie in the morning, they clam the vtter wall, kepted thame selues obscure whill the yettes were opined; and they took the House, and put the Bishopes folkes oute thereof.⁸

Only a handful of MacDonalds had come to take the castle,⁹ but their ingenuity prevailed. The tiny garrison of Dunivaig Castle, consisting of the brother of the Bishop of the Isles and ‘two or three seruandes’, suggests that there was no real expectation of an attack, and these ‘servantes’ may not have been soldiers. The restraint shown by Ragnall in his release of the defending garrison is worthy of note, and suggests he was attempting to mitigate the severity of the inevitable government response.

Ostensibly, the principal impetus behind Ragnall Òg’s actions was the death in early 1613 of his father, Aonghas,¹⁰ which may have impelled him to reclaim Dunivaig and then Islay in his father’s name when the timing was opportune. Perhaps he even sought to

⁶ Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol.III, 1-10; Matheson, ‘Trial of Sir James MacDonald’, 209, 213.

⁷ *RPC*, Vol. IX, 16-18; *The Book of Islay: Documents Illustrating the History of the Island*, ed. Gregory Smith (Edinburgh, 1895), 144-7.

⁸ *HP*, Vol. III, 141-2; Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 369. For another account, see *HP*, Vol. III, 193-4.

⁹ This could indicate that Ragnall Òg was operating as a rogue agent with little support, but this impression may have been deliberately manufactured by Aonghas Òg to legitimise his recovery of the castle from his half-brother.

¹⁰ *RPC*, Vol. IX, 817-8; Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 33 n.35.

assert his leadership over the clan while Sir Seumas, the eldest son, languished in prison. However, the exact motivations of Ragnall Òg's capture of Dunivaig Castle hinge on two conflicting versions of events: one provided by the MacDonalds, and another by Andrew Knox, the Bishop of the Isles.

Aonghas Òg, the younger legitimate son of Aonghas of Dunivaig, had allied with his older brother Sir Seumas against their father in 1598,¹¹ but remained at liberty after Seumas' capture in 1604, and now resided in Islay around six miles from Dunivaig.¹² According to the testimony of Sir Seumas in April 1614, Aonghas Òg heard about the attack on the castle by his half-brother Ragnall Òg and 'immediatlie [sent] the fyre crose athorte the countrey warning all the countrey people who wer affected to his maiesties obedience to ryse and concur with him in the recourie of the hous'.¹³ Dunivaig Castle was then besieged by Aonghas Òg. Ragnall Òg's company apparently

...held good for sex dayes, being weel prouyded with pulder, lunt [match], and bullet, whereof thay fand good store in the House; and thay wer prodigall anough in bestowing the same vpon the beseagares; bot in end, perceauing that thay war not able to keepe the House, thay in the night eshued [escaped] at a bak yett [gate], in a litle boat with sex oares, which lay at the Castell; and took with them such goodes as thay fand in the House.¹⁴

This two-part siege may highlight the effectiveness of experienced Gaelic warriors at this time. Ragnall Òg and his small band of followers were able to easily outwit and overwhelm the castle garrison, and when in possession of the castle and its supplies, they withstood a six-day siege by a numerically superior force, utilising firearms to keep Aonghas Òg at bay. Notably, Ragnall Òg was mindful to time his manoeuvres for maximum effect: attacking the castle 'airlie in the morning' and using the cover of darkness to later escape.

Dunivaig Castle was now in possession of Aonghas Òg, who attempted to present himself as a dutiful crown servant. Sir Seumas helped his brother foster this image by claiming Aonghas Òg had immediately tried to restore the castle to the bishop's servants, but they had refused to receive it. This explanation was met with some scepticism from the

¹¹ Matheson, 'Trial of Sir James MacDonald', 213.

¹² Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 369-70.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Privy Council,¹⁵ as an alternative narrative of the above events had been provided by Andrew Knox, the Bishop of the Isles. Knox argued that Aonghas Òg and Ragnall Òg were in league, with the former encouraging the latter to capture the castle and be ‘the first authour of his rebellious’.¹⁶ Aonghas Òg then conducted an elaborate show siege to convince the king of his loyalty, and thereby obtain the rights to the castle of Dunivaig from the grateful monarch. On 9 June 1614, the Bishop of the Isles conveyed this information to the Privy Council:

...the surpryse and taking of the house be Ronnald proceeded from the said Angus, and by speciall comand, warrand and direction from him, And that he fearing that the said Ronnald wold discover that mater, hes now ltelie slane his foure men, and tane him self prisoner...¹⁷

It soon became clear that, despite Sir Seumas’ claims to the contrary, Aonghas Òg was refusing to convey the castle to the bishop. In his defence, he claimed his tight grip on the castle was only for fear of prosecution for capturing it without a royal commission.¹⁸ Calling his bluff, the government clerk, James Primrose, claimed the Council ‘wes gracioslie plesit to grant unto thame oure favour and pardoun for all thair bigane offensis conditionale that they wald rander the said house to the said bischop’.¹⁹ Instead, the MacDonalds reinforced their garrison with more men and supplies with the apparent intention of holding the castle as ‘ane house of warre’ against the king.²⁰

For a brief moment, it appeared that the bishop had actually made some headway in negotiations and the castle would soon be surrendered. On 6 August 1614, the Privy Council issued a remission for Aonghas Òg and his accomplices, and praised his ‘good service’ for ousting the previous lawless occupants of the castle. It was noted he was ‘willing to rander and delyver bak agane the said hous to Andro, Bischope of the Ylis’.²¹ This came just three days after the principal island chiefs were summoned to Edinburgh on 3 August to renew their pledge to uphold the Band and the Statutes of Iona of 1609. MacGregor interprets the summons as a precautionary measure to ‘contain’ the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹⁶ *Thanes of Cawdor*, 231.

¹⁷ *HP*, Vol. III, 143-4. The Privy Council was convinced by this version of events. See *Thanes of Cawdor*, 233.

¹⁸ *HP*, Vol. III, 195.

¹⁹ *Thanes of Cawdor*, 233.

²⁰ *HP*, Vol. III, 144.

²¹ *RPC*, Vol. X, 706, 262.

MacDonald rebellions on Islay.²² The Band and Statutes of 1609, especially the former, had been designed as a pledge of loyalty to the crown, and renewing these promises in the wake of this uprising was a strong test of that loyalty. It may also have been a message to the MacDonalds, emphasising their political isolation, and it seems to have been briefly successful.

However, by the middle of September, relations had again deteriorated, and the Bishop was attempting to muster the ‘cuntrie people’ of Islay to oppose Aonghas Òg. The people of Islay were reportedly too ‘busied with thair harvest’ to help,²³ and Knox also failed to secure the military support of prominent island chiefs: MacDonald of Sleat, MacLeod of Harris, and MacLean of Duart.²⁴ Only 70 men followed the bishop – 50 were professional soldiers supplied by the government and 20 were clansmen of MacAulay of Ardincaple – and he was becoming rapidly outnumbered.²⁵ With Dunivaig Castle acting as a focal point for the rising, the MacDonalds gathered together a sizeable force of 140-160 men and went on the offensive on 21 September. In the middle of the night, they surrounded the bishop’s house on Islay and destroyed his four boats. In the morning, the MacDonalds made ‘mony threatening speitches to haue massacred him and his company’.²⁶ Knox was forced to sign a contract binding him to procure Aonghas Òg a seven-year lease of Islay, and secure a pardon for all of the rebels.²⁷ To compel his effort in this matter, Knox’s eldest son, Thomas, and nephew, John Knox of Rampherlie, were taken as hostages.²⁸

With the Bishop of the Isles twice humiliated and Dunivaig Castle firmly in the hands of militarily active MacDonalds, there was much discussion among royal agents about how to proceed. The MacDonalds’ aggression towards the bishop was enough to convince the Privy Council that Aonghas Òg had ‘falslie and treacherouslie’ captured Dunivaig under the false pretence of aiding the king.²⁹ Around this time, MacDonald of Dunluce’s claim to the island was reneged in favour of Campbell of Cawdor, after he pledged to recover Dunivaig Castle and ‘command the hail Ile’. For that purpose, the Privy Council liaised with Sir Arthur Chichester, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, to provide Cawdor with six cannons and 200 professional English soldiers. Any more soldiers were to be

²² MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 126-7; *RPC*, Vol. X, 698-700.

²³ *HP*, Vol. III, 149.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Thanes of Cawdor*, 232; *HP*, Vol. III, 153-5.

²⁷ *HP*, Vol. III, 149-52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁹ *RPC*, Vol. X, 720.

raised by Cawdor himself.³⁰ On 11 October 1614, Knox begged the king to reconsider Cawdor's ownership of Islay, highlighting the futility of rooting 'out one pestiferous clan [to] plant in one lytill bettir'. This, he said, could only 'breid grit trubill in ye Iylles'.³¹ His protestations fell on deaf ears, and on 26 October 1614, Cawdor was given his commission.³²

Over the last few months, the reputation of Dunivaig Castle's defensibility had been greatly embellished by Sir Seumas, and it was widely believed to be 'infinitt stronge' with walls (presumably made of turf) 30 feet thick.³³ Taking no chances, the government ordered a trial run of its artillery against 'some yett [gate] within the Castle of Edinburgh' to have 'some prooffe quhat the pittart [petard] will be able to do'.³⁴ The Privy Council had by now come to strongly suspect Sir Seumas' collusion in this MacDonald conspiracy and instructed the Captain of the Guard in Edinburgh to 'keepe him close prisonar'.³⁵ Able to provide the Privy Council with information of the status of Dunivaig in April 1614, he was clearly in communication with his kinsmen. When his cell was searched in June, letters to Aonghas Òg and his mother were found, but they contained nothing incriminating to implicate him in a conspiracy.³⁶ Writing from his prison cell in Edinburgh Castle in October, Sir Seumas made one final plea for freedom,³⁷ but according to Alexander Seton, the earl of Dunfermline and Lord Chancellor, on 9 December 1614, the king was not interested in making any deals with 'sic peopill' and was confident the government's military could 'dantoun all the pride of sic barbarous limmers'.³⁸

Late in November, Cawdor's army was closing in on Dunivaig Castle, but reinforcements from Ireland led by Sir Oliver Lambert did not arrive until 14 December,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 716-20; *HP*, Vol. III, 158; *Thanes of Cawdor*, 229. It was briefly envisaged that a secondary objective of Cawdor's campaign would be to bring in the island chiefs for another renewal of their oaths, but this was ultimately deemed unnecessary because 'all thir people are vnder band for thair goode behavioure'. See *HP*, Vol. III, 167-8.

³¹ *HP*, Vol. III, 162.

³² *RPC*, Vol. XI, 716-20, 279. A copy of 'The Lieutenentis Commissioun of Justiciarie' contained in *The Book of the Thanes of Cawdor* is dated 22 October 1614. See *Thanes of Cawdor*, 231-3.

³³ *Book of Islay*, 247; *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. VI, 287. This is despite the fact that the MacDonalds had captured the castle with a tiny force with relative ease.

³⁴ *RPC*, Vol. X, 726; *Book of Islay*, 197-8.

³⁵ *HP*, Vol. III, 144.

³⁶ *Ibid.* He was still thought to be providing counsel and advice to his brother, Aonghas Òg.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 165. Sir Seumas offered to capture his half-brother Ragnall Òg (who first captured Dunivaig Castle), Ragnall MacDonald, and Colla Ciotach, all of whom would be 'keipt in irnes'. Although the sincerity of this pledge is difficult to ascertain, he may have rationalised that the security of his kindred in Islay could not be guaranteed while these 'rebellious' elements remained, and their imprisonment and probable execution was a price he was willing to pay for this security.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

by which time Cawdor had retreated to the mainland and ‘dispersed his men’.³⁹ The campaign was re-launched in January in defiance of the ‘worst of all weathers ever heard of’.⁴⁰ Cawdor was instructed to pardon Aonghas Òg should he safely deliver the pledges (Knox’s son and nephew) and leniency was also recommended for any ‘cuntrie people’ whose aid had been forcefully extorted by the MacDonalds. Any known and willing collaborators were to be punished as rebels however, unless they informed Cawdor of ‘associats of this rebellion of as goode rank as them selves’.⁴¹ Knox was concerned that Aonghas Òg’s followers would discover these unfavourable terms and threaten the safety of the pledges, so he planned to accompany Cawdor on his campaign. The delicate nature of the mission was made clear to Cawdor who was urged to use ‘all possible cair and dexteritie’ to secure the release of the hostages.⁴²

The unexpected intervention of the earl of Dunfermline rendered these warnings moot. In late November or early December 1614, Dunfermline dispatched one of his servants, George Graham of ‘Eryne’ ‘quha had guid Irish’, to receive the pledges and the castle from Aonghas Òg. Graham had been authorised by the Chancellor to negotiate in his name, and the offered terms (according to Aonghas Òg anyway) were exceedingly generous: in exchange for the release of the hostages, the Chancellor would cancel Cawdor’s commission, name Aonghas Òg ‘constable’ of Dunivaig, and ‘acquire him ane richt of the lands of Ila’.⁴³ The MacDonald leader was amenable to these terms and on 17 December the hostages were handed over safely, along with the ‘keyis off the hous’.⁴⁴ When Graham was leaving with the hostages in tow, Aonghas Òg expressed concern that ‘keiping of the Castell micht breid some trouble to him heirefter’ and requested Graham hold the castle himself. The Chancellor’s servant refused, stating he was only empowered to confirm Aonghas Òg as castellan.⁴⁵ Releasing the hostages was an act of good faith by Aonghas Òg, but as they were his main leverage in negotiations he would come to regret his decision.

³⁹ *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 6; *Book of Islay*, 240.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; *Book of Islay*, 242, 247; *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. VI, 287. It does seem that the winter of 1614/5 was especially harsh. See *Chronicle of Perth*, 17.

⁴¹ *RPC*, Vol. X, 717; *Thanes of Cawdor*, 230; *HP*, Vol. III, 167.

⁴² *HP*, Vol. III, 168.

⁴³ Aonghas Òg may have exaggerated some of Graham’s promises in order to justify his illegal (in the eyes of the crown) possession of the castle.

⁴⁴ *HP*, Vol. III, 171, 178, 186-7, 187-8, 197-9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

On 6 January, Campbell of Cawdor landed on Islay with the 200 English soldiers, and by the next day his ranks had swollen to 340 men.⁴⁶ On 7 January, he sent a scouting force of 160 men to Dunivaig Castle with instructions to pursue the rebels if they were ‘in the fieldes’.⁴⁷ They arrived at Baile Neachdainn within half a mile of the castle on 10 January, and were joined by the rest of Cawdor’s army two days later.⁴⁸ On 20 January, Cawdor gathered supplies to build temporary lodgings for his fellow commanders.⁴⁹ That night, four of the rebels fled Dunivaig Castle and were received by Cawdor ‘according to the tenor of his hienes proclamatioun’.⁵⁰ The following day, 21 January, Raghnaid mac Sheumais (uncle of Sir Seumas and Aonghas Òg) and three others surrendered to Cawdor.⁵¹ On 25 January, a culverin and cannon leased to Cawdor by the government landed in Islay, and another cannon followed on the 27 January. This latter artillery piece was brought ashore within range of the castle walls and the rebels opened fire on Cawdor’s men who were dragging it up the beach to a gun-platform that had been prepared in advance, possibly around 180 metres to the north-east of the castle.⁵² One ‘Hylander’ was shot in the chest and died a few days later, while a ‘worthie gentelman’, Captain Crawford, received a ‘shott that brake the smale of his legg all to shivers’. Six days later he had his leg amputated, but died two hours after the surgery.⁵³ Despite these casualties, Cawdor’s men successfully deployed the cannon and entrenched the land surrounding the castle to prevent the MacDonalds’ escape overland. Meanwhile, Dòmhnall Campbell of Lochawe and Captain Button were sent to ‘watch the rebelles by sea’.⁵⁴

The artillery barrage finally began in the morning of 1 February.⁵⁵ The MacDonalds soon sent a messenger to request a parley inside the castle, but Cawdor, fearing for his safety, refused. For the rest of the day the cannonfire continued, pausing only to allow the MacDonald messenger to walk back-and-forth between the two armies.⁵⁶ By the evening, the MacDonalds were ‘greatlie discouragit be the effect of the battrie’, and Cawdor, anticipating an escape by the sea, strengthened his naval guard.⁵⁷ In the morning of 2 February, the cannon fire continued, until Cawdor sent his own men to invite Aonghas

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 179. Perhaps local support from his new tenants on Islay.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 179-80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵² Caldwell has suggested that the remains of the platform survive at the noted location: Caldwell, ‘The Campbell Takeover’, 97.

⁵³ *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 7; *Book of Islay*, 242; *HP*, Vol. III, 182.

⁵⁴ *HP*, Vol. III, 182-3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 183; *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

Òg to a parley. The MacDonald leader immediately protested that he held the castle as the king's man in accordance with instructions received from the Lord Chancellor's servant, Graham. Cawdor informed him that Graham 'had no suche power' and had 'deceavit him'.⁵⁸ Graham's assurances, allegedly supported by a letter from the Chancellor himself,⁵⁹ had apparently tricked the MacDonald leader into relinquishing his only advantage in negotiations.⁶⁰

The sequence played out once more: the parley was concluded, the cannons resumed firing, and soon 'ane wther' parley was requested by Aonghas Òg. This time however, Cawdor's patience had run out. Outright refusing any further negotiations, he demanded Aonghas Òg's immediate submission, and unable to withstand the continuing barrage any longer, Aonghas Òg, accompanied by other 'principall of the rebelles', left the castle at five or six o'clock, 'knilit all befor the luiftenant', and offered their unconditional surrender.⁶¹ Not all who submitted were fighting men: Lambert noted that Aonghas Òg's wife, Colla Ciotach's wife, 'nurses, and children' all left the castle.⁶² Cawdor could not yet claim possession of the castle however, as Colla Ciotach and a small band of followers still remained inside. With no means to bargain for their lives, that night they made a 'faire skape to the sea'.⁶³ Cawdor's naval guard had become complacent and

...under clood of night...ye rebellis wshit owt in a boat whiche yei haid fittit for ye purpos. Sum of the luiftenant's men that watchit for yem by sea did geive them a wollie of shoat and lenchit owt yair boatis and followed them which ye rebellis answerit wth yair shoats...and all yat war one the shoare might sie the luiftenant's boattes and ye rebellis boate gif fyre to wthers a longe tyme; a rock lykwayis neire to the Castell wherone yair was plantit a nuber of muskiteris did geue ye rebellis at thair wshing owt a woille of shoat. The rebellis boat being moire swift then the boats yat were apoyntit to wache them that night did ower rowe them and the rebelles boatte being sum what onthight [not watertight] althoghe werrie swift yei

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 187-8. It may be significant that the MacDonalds could not provide an original of the Chancellor's letter, only a copy.

⁶⁰ Aonghas Òg was not necessarily as passive and gullible as he seemed, and may have actively fabricated Graham's assurances (and the Chancellor's letter) in order to save face and justify his continued control of the castle. Sir Oliver Lambert, who commanded Cawdor's reinforcements from Ireland, certainly took this view, noting that he 'found neither frase nor matter likelie to fall from the pen of the lord Chancelor'. See Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 39-40; *Book of Islay*, 241; *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 6.

⁶¹ *HP*, Vol. III, 183-4.

⁶² *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 9; *Book of Islay*, 245.

⁶³ *Book of Islay*, 246; *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 10.

were forcit to drawe to the narrest shoire yei culd cum att and landit in the Od [Oa peninsula] of Illa where yair boate wes sunk...⁶⁴

The MacDonalds nevertheless managed to elude Cawdor's forces, but the lieutenant sent soldiers in pursuit and ordered all of the boats and galleys in Islay be destroyed 'so as yei can not eshaipe'.⁶⁵ Six of Colla Ciotach's followers were eventually apprehended and executed on 6 February. Another handful of MacDonalds seized at the 'fort' of Loch Gorm situated on Eilean Mór was initially given the same sentence.⁶⁶ Ultimately, Dunivaig Castle did not live up to the reputation painted by Sir Seumas. The artillery bombardment had destroyed most of the castle, reckoned to have been 'invincible without the canon and famyn'.⁶⁷ The barrage was so damaging that an 'aboundance of rewins and rubbidge' caused the inner bawn [defensive wall] and castle well to be 'chocktt vpp'.⁶⁸

Aonghas Òg was brought to Edinburgh for interrogation,⁶⁹ during which he attempted to shirk all responsibility for the events at Dunivaig. He claimed Colla Ciotach had led the attack on Ragnall Òg in Dunivaig Castle in 1614, after which Aonghas Òg hunted down Ragnall Òg, eventually capturing him 20 days after the siege. According to Aonghas Òg, Ragnall Òg then revealed that his initial assault on Dunivaig had been encouraged by Sir Seumas' illegitimate son, Dòmhnall Gorm, who warned that all his 'freindis' in Islay were to be 'turnit out'.⁷⁰ Any confessions wrung from Aonghas Òg are rendered questionable by the fact his life was at stake, but this may confirm Sir Seumas' involvement through his son, Dòmhnall Gorm. Finally, Aonghas Òg claimed the connivance of a 'greate one', an individual who had orchestrated this whole affair, and whose identity would be revealed if Aonghas Òg was given 'assurance of his life'.⁷¹ Donald Gregory believed this 'greate one' was the earl of Argyll, who was attempting to manipulate the MacDonalds into self-destruction.⁷² If the king suspected Argyll's involvement he seemed little concerned.⁷³

Ultimately, the promise of revealing the 'greate one' was not enough to save Aonghas' Òg's life. He and several of his followers were condemned for high treason and

⁶⁴ *HP*, Vol. III, 184-5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Book of Islay*, 247.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 244; *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 9.

⁶⁹ *HP*, Vol. III, 201.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁷² Gregory, *History*, 365.

⁷³ *HP*, Vol. III, 201-2.

hanged at the Market Cross in Edinburgh on 8 July.⁷⁴ They went to their deaths protesting about George Graham's promises, and according to Calderwood, because the 'said George was not troubled by the counsel or anie other, the people thought hard of it'.⁷⁵ By Stevenson's estimation, Aonghas Òg was a 'remarkably bad politician' and a mere figurehead, with Colla Ciotach acting as the main 'driving force behind the rebellion'.⁷⁶ The contemporary opinion of Lambert supports Stevenson's view as he observed there was 'noe great substance in Aggnus [sic] other than Coll M^cDonnell thrust into him'.⁷⁷ Certainly, Aonghas Òg's release of the hostages was a politically imprudent move, and the version of events provided at his interrogation stretches credibility.

Back on Islay, Cawdor's suppression of the rising was nearly complete. In a letter from 7 February by Lambert to King James, he commended Cawdor as a 'worthy gentleman of an excellent good nature and well disposed'. Lambert was less complimentary about the Highlanders under Cawdor's command:

They are obedient to noe commande, subiecte to noe order; ravine [rapine] and spoyle all where they come. Marshall lawe in noe request amongst them – noe way being to governe armed multitudes without it.⁷⁸

In the event of future uprisings by the Highlanders, Lambert advised the king that a small force of 400 paid soldiers, with an auxiliary force of 100 'Iryshe', could easily suppress a Highland army of 'thousands'. Nevertheless, he recognised that they had 'good and able boddyes' and could 'easilye [be] made soldiours in an other government'.⁷⁹ Although dismissed as uncivilised and disorganised, the Highlanders were acknowledged for possessing latent military potential which could be harnessed, integrated, and redirected towards state interests, perhaps foreshadowing future trends of military recruitment in the Highlands.

Incredibly, the saga of Dunivaig Castle was not yet over. After several abortive attempts over the years, Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig escaped Edinburgh Castle at the end of May 1615, fleeing north and west to the Isles. The Privy Council regarded his breakout as confirmation of his complicity in the treasonous plot to capture Dunivaig Castle, but Sir Seumas justified his actions in a series of broadly similar letters to the Privy

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 272 n.1; *RPC*, Vol. X, 357 n.1; *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 363-70.

⁷⁵ Calderwood, *History*, VII, 200.

⁷⁶ Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 41.

⁷⁷ *Book of Islay*, 244; *CSPI*, Vol. XV, 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 248; *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. VI, 287.

⁷⁹ *Book of Islay*, 248; *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. VI, 287.

Council, the Bishop of the Isles, and the Earls of Caithness, Tullibardin, and Crawford.⁸⁰ In all of these letters he claimed he fled in fear of his life, which was threatened by his brother-in-law, Campbell of Cawdor.⁸¹ His death would certainly have tightened Cawdor's grip on Islay, but this threat (although perhaps genuine) was probably not Sir Seumas' only motivation. His desperation for release was plainly evident in the previous year and as far back as June 1607, when he beseeched the king to 'remember my miserie, and gett me libertie or banishmentt'.⁸² Upon his escape, Sir Seumas immediately convened with 'rebellis and broken men', MacDonald of Keppoch and the eldest son of Clanranald, and soon began to reclaim his clan's lost territory.⁸³

In a 'quasi-inaugural progress through the west Highlands and Islands', including a ceremonial reception from Colla Ciotach on the isle of Eigg,⁸⁴ Sir Seumas gathered troops for his first target: the heavily damaged Dunivaig Castle.⁸⁵ Cowan has argued that Sir Seumas was 'a man alone...not greatly admired by the men of Islay', but quite the reverse seems to be true.⁸⁶ Sir Seumas was an undoubtedly charismatic figure and a natural leader, whose position was reinforced by the legitimacy he wielded as the eldest son and heir of the Dunivaig kindred. The military prestige accrued by felling the mighty Lachlann Mòr MacLean of Duart in 1598 must have instilled further confidence in his cause. Revival of the Lordship of the Isles may even have seemed viable under his leadership.⁸⁷ For these reasons, many within the Clan Donald flocked to his banner. Shortly after his escape, Sir Seumas was only accompanied by 14 'men and boyis', soon reinforced by Keppoch and Colla Ciotach who brought in 16 and 80 men respectively.⁸⁸ By 20 June 1615, Seumas' company had grown to an impressive 300 men, thanks to the support of MacIain of Ardnamurchan who came 'with all his cumpany with him'.⁸⁹

Support from other clans was more limited however. Three chiefs –MacDonald of Sleat, the captain of Clanranald, and MacLeod of Harris – allegedly provided token

⁸⁰ *HP*, Vol. III, 219-26.

⁸¹ Presumably, Cawdor was lobbying the government to carry out Sir Seumas' prior death sentence, pronounced at his trial in 1609. In a letter to Binning, Sir Seumas describes Cawdor as 'onlie suitteris [advocating the loss] of my lyfe and landis'. See *HP*, Vol. III, 264.

⁸² *HP*, Vol. III, 105.

⁸³ *RPC*, Vol. X, 734-5; *HP*, Vol. III, 231-2. As observed by Stevenson, this may suggest a broad Clan Donald coalition opposed to the Campbell juggernaut that within a decade had gained control of the MacDonald territory of Kintyre, Islay, Jura, Colonsay, Ardnamurchan, and Sunart. See Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 44.

⁸⁴ *HP*, Vol. III, 253-55.

⁸⁵ Gregory, *History*, 366-8; MacGregor, 'Warfare', 222.

⁸⁶ Cowan, 'The Campbell Acquisition of Islay', 155.

⁸⁷ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 222.

⁸⁸ *HP*, Vol. III, 253, 226.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 245, 253.

contingents of clansmen, but were careful not to officially endorse the rising.⁹⁰ On 24 June, Tullibardine reported that these chiefs had garrisoned their ‘sea poirtis’ with soldiers to prevent Sir Seumas from mooring in their territory.⁹¹ This may indicate the binding strength of the chiefs’ renewed pledge of loyalty in August of 1614, but they were also directly ordered to pursue the MacDonalds by land or sea.⁹² Providing only nominal support to the MacDonalds gave the chiefs immunity while allowing them to stir the pot. While they may have been waiting for proof of Sir Seumas’ abilities to gauge the rebellion’s chance of success before fully committing to his cause, they could also have been waiting for a sign of weakness. On 20 June, a bounty of £2000 was offered for the capture or killing of Sir Seumas (soon raised to £5000) and 5,000 merks for his main accomplices, Colla Ciotach and MacDonald of Keppoch.⁹³ Such a high reward may have been a sorely tempting prospect for some of these chiefs, especially those with substantial debts like MacLeod of Harris and MacDonald of Sleat.⁹⁴ Perhaps in frustration at this reserved response, Sir Seumas captured the second son of MacDonald of Glengarry and a son of the Captain of Clanranald.⁹⁵ Glengarry’s eldest son reportedly retaliated by attacking MacDonald of Keppoch’s company, capturing two rebels, whom he promised to present before the Privy Council.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, Dòmhnall, the captain of Clanranald, was asked by Sir Seumas to attend a meeting where he would have ‘delyverit him his sone’, but Clanranald refused to have ‘ony middling with thame’, and his son was soon released unharmed.⁹⁷

Now a symbol of dogged MacDonald resistance, the capture of Dunivaig was a necessary first step in the revival of the clan’s fortunes. On 23 June, the MacDonalds again used the element of surprise to compensate for their lack of siege equipment, although Sir Seumas commanded a much larger infantry force than had his two brothers.⁹⁸ In a letter to the earl of Crawford, Sir Seumas claimed that he and his men

...lay in ane buis [ambush] about the hous, till the Captane and tuelf of his best men com out. We persewed ouer rathlie or they come far from the hous. The

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 254, 275. On 18 June, MacLeod of Harris reported that Dòmhnall Gorm MacDonald of Sleat had entertained Colla Ciotach and supplied Seumas with a ‘bigg boat’ and a ‘nomber’ of his ‘folkes of Sleat’. Considering his previous conflict and continuing legal struggle over Trotternish with MacDonald, he may have had ulterior motives for naming him as the chief aider and abettor of these outlaws. See *Ibid.*, 243.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 246, 250.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 247; *RPC*, Vol. X, 733-4, 736.

⁹⁴ MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility*, 149-51.

⁹⁵ *RPC*, Vol. X, 347; *HP*, Vol. III, 242, 247.

⁹⁶ *RPC*, Vol. X, 347; *HP*, Vol. III, 247, 253.

⁹⁷ *HP*, Vol. III, 253.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

Captanes men fled, bot him selue and three or foure, they wer slane. We zeid in at the vtter Barmkin [curtain wall] with the rest, but they closed the zett of the inner Barmkin.⁹⁹

Inside the outer curtain wall, the MacDonalds took the outer tower and ignited the gate of the inner barmkin, all the while exchanging gunfire with the garrison:

...we shott from four in the morning till efter tuelfue. Tuo of myne wes killed, a shouldior [soldier] and ane boy; tuo lightlie hurt. The hous wes promised to yield or ten hours the morn. And so wes the Pryour and all that come out gatt thair lyff and there cloathes.¹⁰⁰

Again the garrison, including the Commendator of Ardchattan and his two sons,¹⁰¹ was spared, but James did not shy from using deadly force in the opening assault, killing the ‘Capitane’ of the castle, Alasdair MacDougall.¹⁰² Overall, he faced stout resistance from a small but well-trained garrison, suggesting the previous incidents at Dunivaig Castle had led to a significant upgrade in defences.

Although the siege was a success, the beleaguered Dunivaig had clearly lost all viability as a defensible structure,¹⁰³ as Sir Seumas quickly moved north to fortify the castle situated on Eilean Mór in Loch Gorm.¹⁰⁴ In July it was reported that the MacDonalds

...ar all bissie fortiefeing the eyllan of Ellan loch gorme with ane baoune of feall [bawn or enclosure of turf] of ane greit breid, as the reportis, tuanttie foote bread [20 feet broad]. Sir James is bissie about it [with] sex scoir of men euerie day.¹⁰⁵

Between 1 and 3 July, Sir Seumas sent another series of letters to prominent nobles, just as he had done upon his escape from Edinburgh, all of which provide interesting insight into his motivations. In his letter to the earl of Caithness, he reiterated that the threat posed to his life by Cawdor forced his escape,¹⁰⁶ but offered a more emotive rationale in his letter to

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 267; Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, Vol. III, 17-18.

¹⁰¹ *HP*, Vol. III, 257, n. 1.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 255-57.

¹⁰³ Gilleasbuig Campbell, younger son of Campbell of Ardchattan, reported on 15 July that Dunivaig was ‘not hable to be manned’. See *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁰⁴ Gregory, *History*, 376.

¹⁰⁵ *Book of Islay*, 322; *HP*, Vol. III, 273. Caldwell’s archaeological study has confirmed that fortification work was completed by Sir Seumas and has suggested that he built a fort in the south-east corner of Loch Gruinart to ‘protect his line of communications’. See Caldwell, ‘Campbell Takeover’, 98.

¹⁰⁶ *HP*, Vol. III, 264-5.

Lord Binning. He beseeched him to convince the king ‘not to zield to my vnfreindis, to ruit me and my whole race out, being fyve or sex hundreth zeiris possessouris’, and then made a vow:

...for that is certane, I will die befoir I sie a Campbell posses [Islay].¹⁰⁷

The struggle for control of Islay had become deeply personal, and in the eyes of this MacDonald leader, the Campbells were the enemy. He assured Binning that he would never have attacked Dunivaig if it had been held by the king’s men or the Bishop of the Isles – it was assaulted only because it was possessed by those who ‘crewellie opprest the pure cuntrie’.¹⁰⁸

Having secured one part of the homeland, Sir Seumas left Islay for Kintyre in late July,¹⁰⁹ where he was ‘so swelled in pryde’ that he ‘sent the fyre corss throw the cuntrie and wairned all the inhabitants betuix Tarbert and the Mull of Kintyre to tak thair land’ from him.¹¹⁰ This was another move laden in symbolism, an act of reclamation not occupation. Indeed, his overall campaign was much more ambitious and aggressive than that of his kinsmen Ragnall Òg and Aonghas Òg. Not content to simply wait behind the walls of Dunivaig Castle, he proactively began to claw back the lands held by his father and his predecessors.

Throughout June and July, the Privy Council received a number of reports that emphasised the seriousness of Sir Seumas’ rising, which was soon to reach its peak in terms of manpower.¹¹¹ In just over two weeks, 20 June to 5 August, estimates of his army size doubled from 300 to 600 men.¹¹² It was later reported that the ‘haill cuntrey people of Kintyre, Ilay, Colonsay, Juray, and Gigha’ supported him with shelter, supplies, and fighting men.¹¹³ Worrying reports indicated Sir Seumas was poised to invade Argyll.¹¹⁴ His new base in Islay was acting as a magnet for disaffected clansmen from across the Isles, and on 15 July it was even reported (via information provided by Sir Seumas’ wife, Margaret Campbell of Cawdor) that the MacDonald leader had made a ‘speciall band’ with MacDonald of Sleat, the Captain of Clanranald, and MacLeod of Harris, while MacLean of

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 263-4.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 217-18, 241-44, 253-55, 276-7; MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 168 n. 198.

¹¹² *HP*, Vol. III, 245, 283.

¹¹³ *RPC*, Vol. X, 760.

¹¹⁴ MacGregor, ‘Statutes’, 168 n. 198.

Duart would stay neutral.¹¹⁵ Curbing the rebellion was now an immediate priority as it had the potential to dramatically shift the power-balance in the Highlands and Isles.¹¹⁶

Although receiving an enthusiastic offer of service in June from Ruairidh MacLeod of Harris,¹¹⁷ the government ideally wanted the earl of Argyll to pursue the MacDonalds. The Council invoked the MacDonalds' self-professed motive of reclaiming land given 'over thair headis' to the Campbells as recourse for laying responsibility upon Argyll.¹¹⁸ He had been residing in England for some time, and on 29 July 1615, MacNeill of Taynish reported to Binning that Argyll's long absence from Scotland had emboldened the rebels – 'all the cuntries ar aloft'.¹¹⁹ This news prompted Binning to chastise Argyll's sluggish response to the crisis, claiming it was to his dishonour, 'disadvantage and discredit'.¹²⁰ Despite his reluctance allegedly on account of his ill-health,¹²¹ Argyll was ultimately convinced to lead the campaign. With the Council anticipating a largely naval expedition, he was provided with 'galayes, birlinges, and veshelles' outfitted with a 'whole furnitoure of warre and with fourtie dayes prouision and victuales'.¹²²

Assembling a force of around 1,500 men in total, Argyll set off in pursuit of the MacDonalds from Duntroon on Loch Crinan in early September.¹²³ In the intervening time, Sir Seumas' army had continued to grow and now probably numbered around 1,000 men.¹²⁴ Argyll divided his army into two main divisions: one to the east of Kintyre and one to the west. Two companies under the command of Cawdor numbering 700-800 men in total were sent along the western coast to capture Sir Seumas' galleys at his landing point on the west coast of Kintyre. Failing that, they were to wait for Argyll to arrive overland from the east side of Kintyre with another two companies, commanded by Captain Boswell and Campbell of Kilmichael, again numbering 700-800 men.¹²⁵ Argyll arrived at Tarbert at night, just two miles away from Sir Seumas' camp. The MacDonald leader had directed his uncle Raghnaid to block Argyll's path overland with a force of 300-400 men, while Colla Ciotach was sent with 60 men to Tarbert, where he captured Cailean Campbell of Kilberry,

¹¹⁵ *HP*, Vol. III, 273.

¹¹⁶ This evidence makes it difficult to agree with Cowan's assessment that Sir Seumas was 'not greatly admired by the men of Islay who had ignored his interests in the recent rising'. See Cowan, 'The Campbell Acquisition of Islay', 155.

¹¹⁷ *HP*, Vol. III, 243-44.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 276-77.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 231-32.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 245.

¹²³ *RPC*, Vol. X, 762.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 776.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 763.

who had become separated from Argyll's camp.¹²⁶ Fearing 'ane trayne' [a trap], Argyll did not personally pursue Colla, but sent his naval force after him. Colla received intelligence that Cawdor was on the isle of Gigha, and 'not beleving that it could be possible', he sailed towards the island, where he was ambushed by Argyll's western company – 15 or 16 of his men were killed and four of his *birlinnean* were captured.¹²⁷ MacDonald of Keppoch was also attacked by this western force, and was pushed back to the southern end of Kintyre 'quahir he eschaiped verie narrowlie with the loisis of his veschellis and some of his men'.¹²⁸

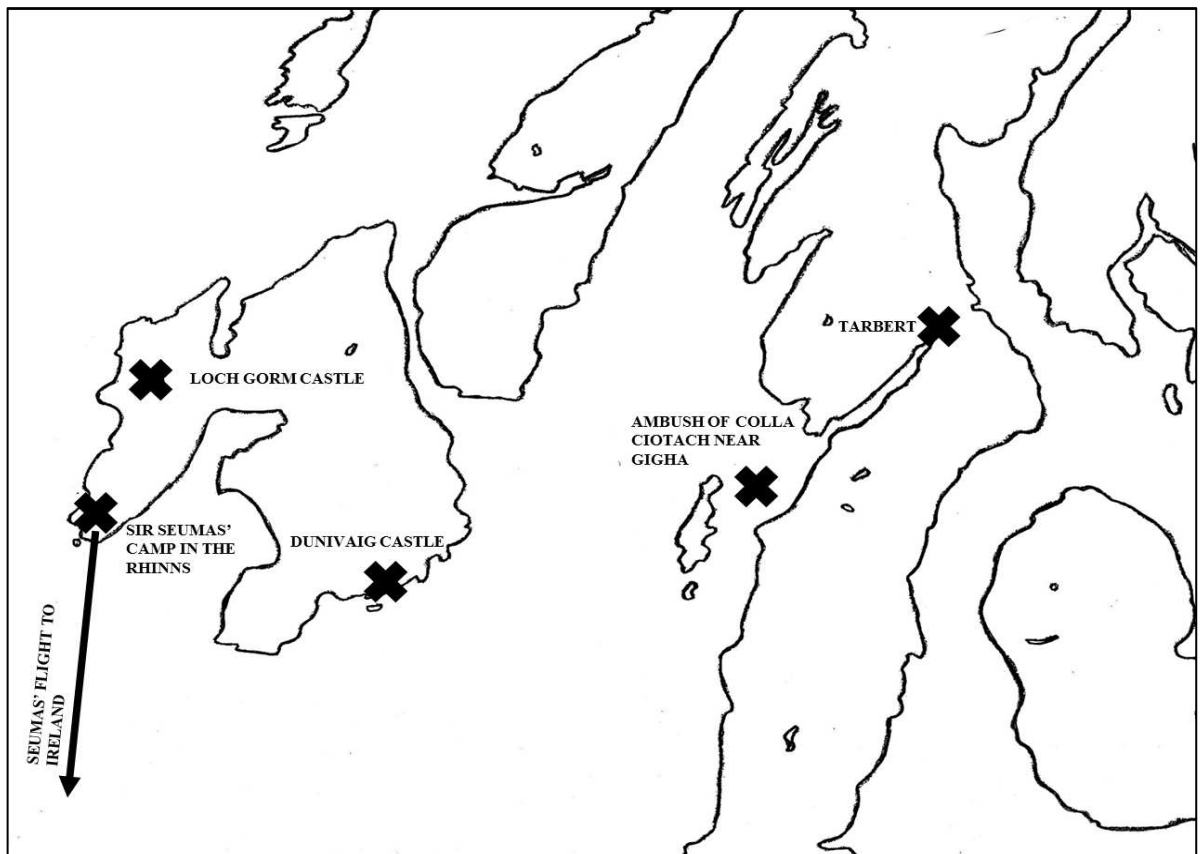


Figure 5: Military activity during the 'Islay Rising', 1615

Thus far the engagements had not gone in Sir Seumas' favour. Two of his key leaders had been driven off by Argyll's forces, and his only success had been in halting Argyll's overland advance. Recognising that his men were 'so disordourit', Sir Seumas broke up camp in Kintyre and sailed south to Rathlin Island. A few days later, he sailed north again and set up camp on the southern edge of the Rhinns of Islay near the small island of Orsay,

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*; *HP*, Vol. III, 299-300.

¹²⁸ *RPC*, Vol. X, 763.

where he gathered around half of his scattered army, to the number of 500 men.¹²⁹ From Argyll's perspective, the campaign had gone according to plan. He had already severely weakened Sir Seumas' military capacity, while his force remained almost entirely unscathed.

Two English ships-of-war commanded by Captains Wood and Monk had been sent to support Argyll's expedition, and they transported him to Islay, landing in the natural harbour of 'Loddummes', far enough away from Sir Seumas' camp to prevent any harassment.¹³⁰ Argyll's army camped for two days 'for refrescheing of his men' and negotiations with Sir Seumas, who pledged to surrender in four days' time. Deducing that Sir Seumas was just buying time for the wind to favour a swift escape north, Argyll only agreed on the condition that Sir Seumas surrendered within 24 hours and relinquished control of the 'two fortis he keipit' in Islay.¹³¹ Running out of options, Sir Seumas beseeched Colla Ciotach to give up the two castles, but he 'altogidder refused'.¹³² Colla had made his own bargain to surrender the castles to Argyll, freeing the Campbell chief to launch an attack on Sir Seumas' camp. When night fell, he sent Cawdor with the king's warships and 1,000 men to capture the MacDonalds' ships and trap them on the island.¹³³ The MacDonalds were alerted to this danger by 'great beakins vpon the tope of ane hie hill' made by some sympathetic islanders. Their loyalty to their chosen chief seems genuine. According to Argyll, some of the islanders begged Sir Seumas to stay because they had 'hazard all for him, and knew thair wald be no mercie schawin to thame, they sould all die at his feit', but MacDonald of Keppoch convinced Sir Seumas to escape. Accompanied by Keppoch and around 20 others, the MacDonald leader sailed around the northern coast of Ireland to 'Inchedaholl',¹³⁴ a small island near Inishowen on the western coast.¹³⁵ The remainder of Sir Seumas' army – perhaps as many as 450 men – were forced to 'tak the hillis in the nicht'.¹³⁶

The next morning, Argyll received the submission of Colla Ciotach, who surrendered Dunivaig Castle and Loch Gorm and released his prisoner, Campbell of Kilberry.¹³⁷ Reporting his campaign before the Privy Council on 21 December 1615,

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 764.

¹³⁰ *HP*, Vol. III, 285, 300; *RPC*, Vol. III, 764.

¹³¹ *RPC*, Vol. X, 764.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Possibly Inishtrahull Island.

¹³⁵ *RPC*, Vol. X, 764.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*; *HP*, Vol. III, 301, 294, 295-6.

Argyll justified his decision to spare Colla's life and a 'few utheris' due to 'unseaounable weather, the extreame seiknes of the maist pairt of the sojouris, and the grite skairsnes of viveris, without ony hoip of supplie'.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Argyll did not release the whole garrison as 15 of the ringleaders were executed,¹³⁹ and another five of Sir Seumas' accomplices were presented to the Privy Council on 24 November 1615.¹⁴⁰ Colla Ciotach meanwhile was employed to hunt down some of his former associates, the MacDuffies of Colonsay.¹⁴¹

By early October, Islay had been secured,¹⁴² and Cawdor was confirmed in the escheated patrimony of the MacDonalds of Dunivaig by Argyll.¹⁴³ However, Sir Seumas' escape meant that Argyll's victory was far from total, and the Privy Council feared another uprising was on the cards. Argyll had sent 30 men in hot pursuit of Sir Seumas in Ireland, but he eluded them by fleeing to the Spanish Netherlands.¹⁴⁴ Lord Binning complained to Campbell that the whole expedition was 'without any effect, bot the wrack of the poore beggerlie tennentis of Ilay and Kintyre', and that with the escape of the most prominent MacDonald leaders, the 'rebellion will never be thought quenched'. Emphasising the point, he claimed he did not 'know quhat ringleadars these ar whome ye...bring in'.¹⁴⁵ The campaign may have been less conclusive than the Privy Council would have wished, but realistically Argyll had achieved much in a very short space of time. The efficacy of his strategy was in his manoeuvring and locational awareness, which had funnelled Sir Seumas into chokepoints and left him isolated on the island he called home. As a commander, Argyll was perhaps overly cautious, and may have achieved total victory had he attacked Sir Seumas on foot in Kintyre, yet his willingness to delegate was clearly effective. An apparent reluctance to lead from the front could indicate aversion to open battle, having experienced extreme personal danger at Glenlivet in 1594, and he certainly exhibited little of his youthful fervour during this campaign. Stevenson has suggested he had increasingly come to find 'the quiet life of an English gentleman preferable to that of a Highland war leader'.¹⁴⁶ Argyll may also have been aware that the use of excessive force

¹³⁸ *RPC*, Vol. X, 764.

¹³⁹ *HP*, Vol. III, 301, 287-8.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 300-1.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 288; Gregory, *History*, 386.

¹⁴² *Thanes of Cawdor*, 237-8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *RPC*, Vol. XI, 467-8, 507; Gregory, *History*, 387-8. He never returned to Scotland, although in 1620/1 he was invited to live 'with the King' in London, where he remained, living on a generous pension of 1,000 merks until his death in 1626. See *RPC*, Vol. XI, 467-8; *HP*, Vol. III, 94-5, 310-2; *Thanes of Cawdor*, 237; *History of the Feuds*, 67.

¹⁴⁵ *HP*, Vol. III, 291-92.

¹⁴⁶ Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 45.

could alienate the people of Islay and hinder the Campbells' exercise of lordship over the island in the future. Any apathy for the campaign was further compounded in the immediate aftermath when he was forced to pay for the hired troops out of his own pocket, exacerbating an already difficult financial situation. At the hearing on 21 December, the Privy Council refused to cover the expenses of army upkeep for November and December, claiming to have only agreed to pay for September and October.¹⁴⁷ This reputedly cost Argyll the sizeable sum of £7,000.¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

At the height of the rising in July, it seemed for a fleeting moment that a Hebridean-wide rebellion was at least possible, with the mooted involvement of heavyweights like the MacDonalds of Sleat, the Clanranald, and the MacLeods of Harris. In the end, these clans remained largely aloof, content to see how the uprising panned out before committing direct support to Sir Seumas' cause and facing the wrath of central government. The viability of future risings was profoundly dependent upon the MacDonalds' recovery of their ancestral stronghold, which could have been used as a nerve centre for further reclamation of their lands. Ultimately, the loss and failed recovery of Islay were immutable symbols of MacDonald decline, but this outcome cannot be viewed as an inevitability or as 'one of those magnificent, futile enterprises which are so characteristic of so much highland history'.¹⁴⁹ The seriousness of the rising is evident from the government response, and at its height it had the potential for success.

This succession of sieges exhibits the quintessential military tactics of West Highland clan chiefs, and their more variable political acumen. The general approach to warfare, as shown by the MacDonalds, Cawdor, and the earl of Argyll, was founded upon keen intelligence and situational awareness. On a small-scale level, reconnaissance and planning are in evidence before Seumas MacDonald's assault on Dunivaig Castle, and in general the MacDonalds were consistently able to exploit the surrounding terrain to their advantage. On a larger scale, the earl of Argyll utilised wide flanking manoeuvres to contain the MacDonalds to the west-coast. As effective as the MacDonalds' tactics could be in small-scale engagements, they struggled to compete with the organised government forces, and this episode showcases the growing might of new military technology. Guns

¹⁴⁷ *RPC*, Vol. X, 765-6.

¹⁴⁸ *HP*, Vol. III, 92-3.

¹⁴⁹ Cowan, 'The Campbell Acquisition of Islay', 155.

were widely used by both sides, yet it was artillery that made the greatest impact. Sir Oliver Lambert commented:

Your Majesteis cannons have soe well proclaimed your royall power vnto them, that they will hardly trust any stone walles againe.¹⁵⁰

With James' succession to the throne of England in 1603, the full apparatus of the English war-machine was made available for deployment against uprisings of this nature, and the king's confidence in the ability of his military to suppress the rebellion was justified. Given relatively short notice the Privy Council was able to arrange the deployment of professional troops from Ireland, an arrangement that would have been virtually impossible during Elizabeth's reign. Apart from the missed rendezvous in the winter of 1614, Cawdor's campaign was a significant logistical achievement: trenches were dug to encircle the castle, temporary camps were constructed for the soldiers, gun-platforms were prepared, and several cannons were transported from ship to land with efficiency. Although some of the credit should be apportioned to Lambert, a veteran of Queen Elizabeth's wars in Ireland,¹⁵¹ he was quick to commend Cawdor's own leadership of this composite army during the campaign.

Even if the cannon had diminished their defensive strength, this case study shows the enduring usefulness of castles in war, paralleled by their enduring potency as a symbol. When he laid siege to Dunivaig Castle in 1615, Sir Seumas must have been aware that his attack was eliminating the last vestiges of the castle's defensibility, but he did not call off the siege. Even if rendered militarily useless, the reclamation of the MacDonalds' ancestral seat was a matter of pride, and an essential act if the clan hoped to restore their ailing fortunes. No matter how battered the edifice became, whoever controlled Dunivaig Castle controlled Islay and the future of the clan. The castle remained a focal point for unrest for many years to come. King James recognised it as a 'centre of sedition' and recommended to Cawdor that it be 'utterly demolished so as no longer to afford shelter to traitors'.¹⁵² His advice was not followed, but the same solution was proposed in 1630 when a small group of 'disorderly thieves and limmers of the Yles' made an unsuccessful bid at capturing the

¹⁵⁰ *Book of Islay*, 247; *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. VI, 288.

¹⁵¹ *CSPI*, Vol. III, 531, 553-4.

¹⁵² *RPC* (Series 2), Vol. IV, 186. He may have been acting on the advice of Sir Oliver Lambert who stated: 'In my weake oppinyon [Dunivaig Castle is] fit to be rayseed'. He added that the strategic placement of the castle on a rocky outcrop next to the sea made any siege full of 'toile and danger', and recommended that all future structures be built on 'plaine faier grounde'. See *Book of Islay*, 247; *Calendar of Carew*, Vol. VI, 287.

structure in a manner reminiscent of the actions of Ragnall Òg in 1614.¹⁵³ Cawdor had given possession of Islay to his son, Iain, who asked permission to demolish the castle and build a 'more commodious house for his own dwelling in a more proper part of the isle', an attempt at conclusively terminating the MacDonalds' persistent armed disaffection and underlining the Campbells' control.¹⁵⁴ Once again it seems that this was not carried out, as the MacDonald stronghold was contested during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. In 1647, Alasdair MacColla sent his father, the old Colla Ciotach, to hold Dunivaig Castle and claim Islay in his name. Returning to the castle over 30 years since he had surrendered it to Argyll, Colla led the garrison for around two months before yielding to David Leslie's Covenanting army on 1 July 1647. Later in September or October of that year, he was executed at the order of the earl of Argyll.¹⁵⁵ As argued by Stevenson, this episode, rather than the 1614-15 rising, was the 'last great struggle' of Clann Iain Mhòir, which exemplifies the abiding resonance of Islay and Dunivaig Castle.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ *RPC* (Series 2), Vol. IV, 186.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ According to tradition, he was hanged from the mast of his own galley. See Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 238-41.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory, *History*, 390; Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 50.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

The temporal parameters of this thesis – 1544 and 1615 – coincide with events of national significance in Scotland. In 1544, the defeat of the Frasers by the Clanranald at *Blàr nan Lèine* sent shockwaves throughout the east and west, and in the following year the Dòmhnall Dubh Rising had the potential to permanently redraw power relations in Britain and Ireland. Seventy years later in 1615, the ‘Islay Rising’ was no ‘futile’ effort,¹ but a major military campaign by the MacDonalds of Dunivaig to reclaim Islay, Kintyre, and other lost lands. Throughout this 70-year period were other events of huge import in which the Highlanders and Islanders of Scotland played centre stage. The battle of Glenlivet in 1594, for example, was probably the largest military engagement fought in Scotland since Pinkie in 1547, and at that earlier battle too the Highlanders had played an important role. Throughout the sixteenth century meanwhile, the mercenary trade with Ireland demonstrated the international significance of the Highlanders and Islanders, particularly when it reached its apogee in 1594 and 1595. During those years, the movements and motivations of the ‘redshank’ mercenaries dominated diplomatic interactions between James VI and Elizabeth I. All of this serves to emphasise that the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland was not a ‘frontier’ society on the periphery of the national affairs.² At many points between 1544 and 1615, chiefs and their clansmen were a fundamentally important part of the fabric of Scottish society, a position due in large part to their military activities.

This thesis has shown that small-scale warfare like cattle raiding was common across the West Highlands and Isles in this period, with an intensification in scale and scope in the decade between 1593 and 1603. Such an apparent upsurge in warfare could be a statistical consequence of the broader source base for this period, yet there are several genuine developments that support its existence, and allow the construction of a revised narrative. The Western Isles and some parts of the Highlands, such as the Lennox, were most strongly affected by this intensification, whereas other areas in the Highlands, such as Argyll and Cowal, remained largely unaffected, although low-level disorder continued. The causes of this intensification varied. In the Western Isles, the economic dislocation caused by the eclipse of the mercenary trade turned warfare inwards and strained personal relationships between clans. Government intervention exacerbated these tensions by precipitating conflict in Lewis, and sowing the seeds of future MacDonald risings by

¹ Cowan, ‘The Campbell Acquisition of Islay’, 155.

² Brown, *Noble Power*, 121.

parcelling out traditional heartlands to the Campbells. In the Lennox meanwhile, warfare was instigated by one of Scotland's most senior magnates, the earl of Argyll, in an extension of his personal feud over titles and jurisdictions with the duke of Lennox. This resulted in the proscription of the MacGregors, the kindred that waged Argyll's proxy war in the Lennox. At the turn of the seventeenth century therefore, at least three major kindreds – the MacLeods of Lewis, the MacDonalds of Dunivaig, and the MacGregors – were fighting for their survival.

Following this intensification, there appears to have been a sharp decline in the military capacity and activity in the West Highlands and Isles. Compare for example, the two risings that bookend our period, both of which vie for the title of the 'final' attempt to restore the Lordship of the Isles.³ The Dòmhnall Dubh rising in 1545 enjoyed widespread support within the Western Isles, and through its alliance with the English it posed a significant challenge to the Scottish government. In comparison, the 'Islay Rising' of 1615 was much more limited in both scope and ambition, with the MacDonalds of Dunivaig left fighting against the tide as a comparatively isolated rump of the Lordship of the Isles. Moreover, the political situation in the West Highlands and Isles, and Scotland as a whole, had changed dramatically within those seventy years. The accession of James VI to the English throne in 1603 was an undoubted turning point in the power relations between the government and the clans of the West Highlands and Isles, granting the government newfound reach and resources for curbing independent action and upheaval. Crucially, the Gaelic clans on the west coast could no longer exploit the enmity between the monarchs of Scotland and England through an alliance with the latter.

This external political change was mirrored by an internal shift within the West Highlands and Isles. Most clans gradually adopted a more cautious, pragmatic approach that involved cooperation with central government, and by the 1610s, feuds had visibly decreased. Few clans were willing to risk the repercussions that followed the waging of private war as they had two vivid examples of the consequences of drawing the ire of the crown: the MacGregors and the MacLeods of Lewis. Widespread inter-clan unity throughout the Hebrides was gradually supplanted by a growing focus on protecting the integrity of the individual kin group. For example, in 1613 Ruairidh Mòr MacLeod of Harris overturned his kindred's close association with the MacLeods of Lewis by handing over Niall Odhar MacLeod of Lewis and his son Dòmhnall for execution by the

³ Bannerman, 'Lordship: Historical Background', 210; MacGregor, 'Warfare', 222.

government.⁴ In 1615, Ruairidh Mòr enthusiastically offered to serve against the MacDonalds of Dunivaig on behalf of the crown,⁵ and later aided Campbell of Argyll's suppression of the independent military action of MacIain of Ardnamurchan in 1624-5.⁶ Arguably he had little choice in these matters as the 'preservation of his own clan was at stake',⁷ but the contrast even since his open war with the MacDonalds of Sleat in 1601 is marked. By the end of this period, the clans' only opportunity for 'legitimate' military activity within Scotland was as enforcers for the government in 'quasi-policing operations', which had perhaps been the case for most of the Scottish nobility since the late sixteenth century.⁸

MacGregor's assertion that the 'military capacity of the west Highlands and Islands seems to have fallen away dramatically' after 1615 has considerable justification.⁹ In contrast to the alleged 'Military Revolution' taking place on the European continent between c. 1560 and 1660,¹⁰ the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland between 1544 and 1615 perhaps experienced an overall military decline, precipitous from 1603 onwards (or even earlier with the end of the mercenary trade in 1595). Notably, Donald Gregory ended his *History* with the death of James VI and I in 1625, but the final section of his narrative relates the 'last serious insurrection in the West Highland and Isles' by the MacIains of Ardnamurchan in 1624-25. Dispossessed of their land, the clan chief and his elite were reduced to roving the west coast of Scotland in an English ship, before they were promptly defeated by a combined force led by the Campbells of Argyll and the MacLeods of Harris.¹¹ Gregory clearly saw this period as the end of an era.

Even a cursory glance towards the next generation reveals that the Highlanders and Islanders played an important role in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms.¹² Therefore, it may be premature to identify 1615 as a point of terminal decline, and instead the military capacity of the West Highlands and Isles may have merely been lying dormant. Nevertheless, it is notable that Alasdair MacColla initially struggled to raise forces in the Western Isles, and his Highland contingent at Perth in 1644 was composed of men from

⁴ MacGregor, 'Statutes', 159-60.

⁵ *HP*, Vol. III, 173-5.

⁶ Gregory, *History*, 405-12.

⁷ MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility*, 159. The same could of course be said of those he turned and served against: the MacLeods of Lewis, the MacDonalds of Dunivaig, and the MacIains of Ardnamurchan.

⁸ Brown, *Noble Power*, 123.

⁹ MacGregor, 'Warfare', 211-2.

¹⁰ Michael Roberts, 'The Military Revolution, 1560-1660' (Belfast, 1956), repr. in Roberts, *Essays in Swedish History* (London, 1967), 195-225; Jeremy Black, *European Warfare, 1494-1660* (London, 2002), 32-54.

¹¹ Gregory, *History*, 410-2.

¹² Stevenson, *Highland Warrior*, 108-241, 267.

Atholl and Badenoch.¹³ The lacklustre response of the Hebridean chiefs to Alasdair MacColla mirrors the aversion of the previous generation to Sir Seumas MacDonald's rebellion in 1615, suggesting that an overall change in mindset had indeed occurred since the 1545 Dòmhnall Dubh rising. Much of what had previously sustained the distinctive military capacity of the West Highlands and Isles had waned, or even disappeared altogether, by 1615: castles, galleys, the mercenary trade with Ireland, and Anglo-Scottish enmity. Restoring the Lordship of the Isles in the face of this political change and military decline must have seemed a much more unlikely prospect.

In the West Highlands and Isles, the self-image of the clan elite was heavily predicated on the warrior, and aptitude in military affairs was an important requirement for chiefs. Military service was frequently offered by clansmen with enthusiasm, especially if it involved the defence of rights or a mercenary campaign to Ireland. Immersion of the clan elite in the idealised world envisioned by bardic poetry may have affected their behaviour. For example, at the battle of Glenlivet in 1594, Lachlann Mór MacLean of Duart was praised for conducting himself like a 'good commander...and soldier',¹⁴ but equally he was acting like a good chief. The hundreds of common troops who fled at Glenlivet probably did not carry the same burden of expectation: they had little to gain from staying on the field, but for MacLean and those close to him, who fought to the end against Huntly's cavalry, their undying reputation and honour was at stake. While warfare was undoubtedly one of the central pillars of elite society, it did not supersede all others, and the overall level of militarisation in the West Highlands and Isles can be overstressed. Clan society in general was perhaps defined less by the exigencies of war and more by protection. Military aptitude was a near necessity for clan chiefs, but mainly as proof that they could protect their own clan. Moreover, the military capacity of the West Highlands and Isles has been greatly exaggerated in recent years, although the region probably still maintained a level of military preparedness and activity that outstripped other areas of Scotland, before a possible decline from 1595 onwards.

A universal concern from 1544 to 1615 was the assertion of rights to chiefship and to land. In 1544, Iain Muideartach took up arms to defend his right to the chiefship of the Clanranald, and in 1615, Sir Seumas MacDonald of Dunivaig did the same to reclaim the lands of his clan. Another consistent feature was that warfare was a last resort for chiefs and clansmen. Even in the most intense of feuds, mediation was often attempted to avert

¹³ *Ibid.*, 112-3, 116-7, 127.

¹⁴ *History of the Feuds*, 52; *Chronicles of the Frasers*, 227-8.

potential conflict. Again Sir Seumas tried in vain to negotiate a new settlement with the government and the king, and warfare eventually became his only recourse for reclaiming the land of his forebears. Mediation also took place before *Blàr Tràigh Ghruinneart* in 1598 and Ailean Cameron's ambush of his rebellious kin in 1613, and possibly the battle of Glen Fruin in 1603. Clan society placed a high premium on the fighting elite and leaders were reluctant to risk their lives in pitched battle. To protect the clan's military capacity, any advantage was seized, and thus skirmishes and especially ambushes were the dominant mode of armed conflict in the West Highlands and Isles. In contrast, battles were rare, and in this period only four major pitched battles were fought between opposing clans: *Blàr nan Lèine* in 1544, *Blàr Tràigh Ghruinneart* in 1598, *Coire na Creiche* in 1601, and Glen Fruin in 1603. The time-gap between *Blàr nan Lèine* and *Blàr Tràigh Ghruinneart* is immediately striking. This admittedly elides other serious military activity, yet the possibility that there were no major clan battles for over 50 years presents a clear challenge to traditional perceptions of this period and simultaneously reinforces the idea of an intensification of warfare around 1600. Apart from a few select and arguably extreme instances, the cold-blooded massacres that came to define this period in tradition were very infrequent. Overall in fact, a great deal of restraint was shown as small-scale warfare and violence generally only involved cattle raiding or the targeted killing of one individual. Even in serious feuds and military engagements, captured prisoners were released unharmed more often than they were killed. Although there was no great transformation in the waging of war, conduct did evolve, albeit slowly, between 1544 and 1615. The steady increase in the use of the gun did not herald a revolution in warfare, but extended the repertoire of the traditional soldier. Bow, spear, and gun were all used in an effective blend of old and new. Perhaps the most dramatic change was the decline of the *bìrlinn*, which, although a useful form of transport, had been all but shorn of its military facility by the end of the sixteenth century.

A significant proportion of this thesis has been concerned with 'how' warfare was waged, but of even greater importance is 'why'. As shown in Chapter 2 and especially the case studies, a full understanding of warfare can only be achieved through the analysis of causation, which generally involved the convergence of multiple short-term and long-term factors. At the level of the clan itself, causation typically included the issues of honour and protection, marriage and succession, and rights to land. These factors, which could often overlap, were further exacerbated by the intervention of regional magnates, who incited proxy warfare for their own gain by exploiting internal division within clans. Running as a leitmotif throughout this period is the struggle to succeed the MacDonalds' overlordship in

the west, contested most prominently by Argyll and Huntly. Other important lords maintained their own sphere of influence, including the MacDonalds, Lennox, Atholl, and the MacKenzies, creating a complex web of competing loyalties. At the highest tier, the Scottish crown legitimised the actions of regional magnates, whilst also adopting an increasingly interventionist approach towards the end of the sixteenth century, eventually resulting in the expropriation of entire kindreds. This latter strategy severely destabilised the West Highlands and Isles, as it provoked clans to resort to warfare as a means of survival. Consideration of all of these factors will allow us to more fully understand why many conflicts took place, and thus move past oversimplified and archaic explanations of violence in the Highlands, typified by the idea that war was the ‘natural condition’ of the people that lived there.¹⁵

For centuries, much ink has been spilled in recounting stereotypes of the warlike Highlander and yet there have been few concerted attempts at in-depth analysis of warfare in the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland. The modern military history of the region therefore remains a relatively nascent field of study. With an expansive scope embracing many different clans and localities, this thesis has filled a gap in the historiography, and future studies can only add further texture to this picture. Regional studies of neglected areas like Cowal, the Lennox, Sutherland, Caithness, and the eastern Highlands would undoubtedly yield much of value, as even now historians tend to give more attention to clans like the MacDonalds or the Campbells to the detriment of others. The Irish mercenary trade in the sixteenth century and earlier also merits further study as its international dimension offers much for the historiography of Scotland, and indeed Ireland and England. Nonetheless, this thesis has already shown that while warfare did not exert an all-encompassing hold over clan society, it was nevertheless a crucial and often celebrated aspect of life. Even though warfare was widespread, the traditional reputation of this period as ‘chaos’, characterised by unrestrained armed conflict, clearly fails to account for the diverse contemporary experience. This thesis has demonstrated that warfare can only be fully understood through close analysis of the political context of violence that could otherwise appear casual or ‘wild’ when viewed in isolation. What is now abundantly clear is that warfare in the West Highlands and Isles of Scotland was a complex and nuanced affair, driven by internal and external pressures, and waged by rational and multifaceted individuals.

¹⁵ Mair, *History of Greater Britain*, 48-9

Appendices

Appendix 1: Musters of the Western Isles

1.1: Estimated Muster of the Isles, 1593¹

Island	Muster	Owner
Lewis	700	MacLeod of Lewis
Harris	140	MacLeod of Harris
North Uist	300	MacDonald of Sleat
South Uist	300	Clanranald
Barra	200	MacNeill of Barra
Rona	60	MacLeod of Lewis
Pabay	40	MacLeod of Harris
'Helsker' (Monach Islands or Haskeir?)	20	Murray 'Ycolmkyll' (Iona)
St Kilda	0	MacLeod of Harris
Trotternish (Skye)	500	MacDonald of Sleat
Sleat (Skye)	700	MacDonald of Sleat
Strathardle (Skye)	160	MacKinnon of Strath
Waternish (Skye)	200	MacLeod of Lewis
Duirinish, Bracadale, and Minginish (Skye)	500	MacLeod of Harris
Raasay	80	MacLeod of Lewis
Eigg	60	Clanranald
Rum	10	Clanranald
Canna	20	Clanranald
Muck	16	MacIain of Ardnamurchan
Scalpa	20	MacLean of Duart
Mull	900	Not specified (split between MacLean of Duart, MacLean of Lochbuie, and MacLean of Coll?)
Lismore	200	The Earl of Argyll (and

¹ *CSPS*, Vol. XI, 253-4.

		Campbell of Glenorchy)
Two 'Hwnais' (Shuna? Slate Islands?)	60	MacDougall of Lorn and John Stewart of Appin
Ulva	60	MacQuarrie
Gometra	20	MacLean of Duart
Inchkenneth	20	MacLean of Duart
Iona	Not specified	The Bishop of the Isles
Coll	140	MacLean of Coll
Tiree	300	Not specified (MacLean of Duart?)
Islay	800	Contested by MacLean of Duart and MacDonald of Dunivaig
Jura	100	Contested by MacLean of Duart and MacDonald of Dunivaig
Colonsay/Oronsay	100	MacDuffie (held from MacDonald of Dunivaig?)
Seil	120	The earl of Argyll
Luing	20	MacLean of Duart (held from the earl of Argyll)
Scarba	20	MacLean of Lochbuie
Gigha	100	MacDonald of Dunivaig
Rathlin	Not specified	MacDonald of Dunivaig
TOTAL:		6,876 (incl. Mull and Tiree)

1.2: Estimated Muster of the Isles, c. 1595²

Island	Muster	Owner
Lewis	700	MacLeod of Lewis
Harris	140	MacLeod of Harris

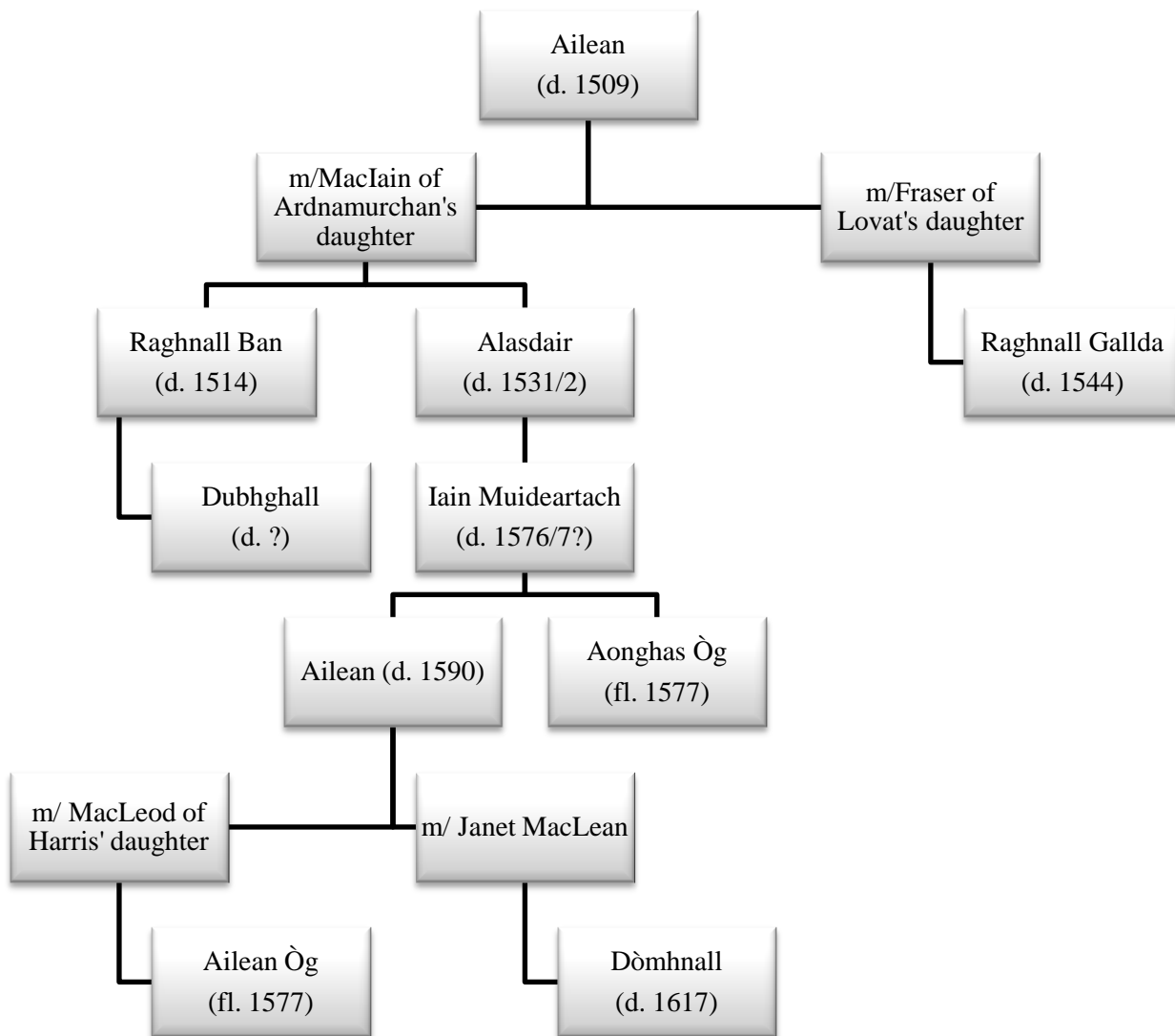
² Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, Vol. III, 428-440.

North Uist	300	MacDonald of Sleat
South Uist	300	Clanranald
Barra	200	MacNeill of Barra
Bernera	60	MacLeod of Lewis
Pabay	40	MacLeod of Harris
'Helsker' (Monach Islands or Haskeir?)	20-24	MacDonald of Sleat
Trotternish (Skye)	500	MacDonald of Sleat
Sleat (Skye)	700	MacDonald of Sleat
Srathardle	160	MacKinnon of Strath
South Rona (Skye)	Not specified	MacLeod of Harris
Waternish (Skye)	200	MacLeod of Lewis
Duirinish (Skye)	240	MacLeod of Harris
Bracadale (Skye)	140	MacLeod of Harris
Raasay	80	MacLeod of Lewis
Eigg	60	Clanranald
Rum	6-7	Clanranald
Canna	20	Clanranald
Muck	16	Laird of Ardinwrthe (?)
Scalpa	20	MacLean of Duart
Mull	600	MacLean of Duart
	200	MacLean of Lochbuie
	50	MacLean of Coll
	50	Laird of McKynvin (?)
Lismore	100	MacDougall of Lorn
'twa Iles callit the Hwnayis' (Shuna? Slate Islands?)	60	MacDougall of Lorn
	60	John Stewart of Appin
Ulva	60	MacQuarrie
Gometra/Inch Kenneth	16-20	MacLean of Duart
Iona	0	The Bishop of the Isles
Coll	140	MacLean of Coll
Tiree	300	MacLean of Duart
Islay	400	MacLean of Duart
	400	MacDonald of Dunivaig

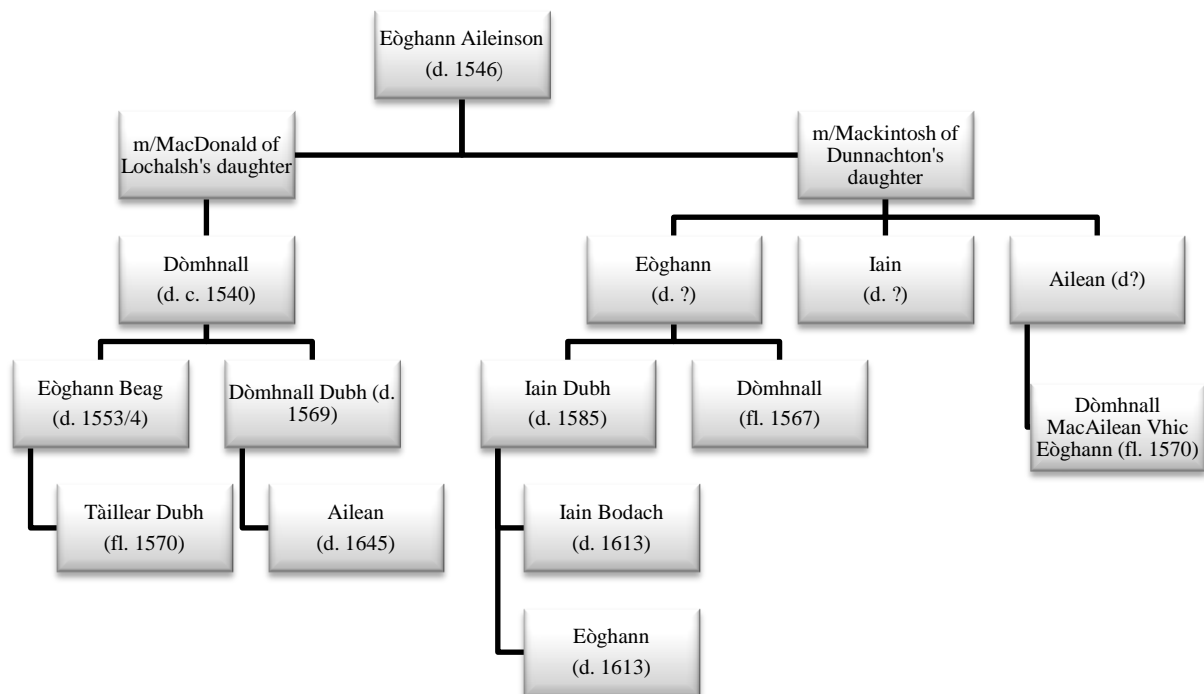
Jura	50	MacLean of Duart
	50	MacDonald of Dunivaig
Colonsay/Oronsay	100	MacDuffie
Seil	120	The earl of Argyll
Gigha	100	MacDonald of Dunivaig
Rathlin	100	MacDonald of Dunivaig
Arran	100	Lord Hamilton
Bute	300	Lord Hamilton
TOTAL:		c. 7,078-83

Appendix 2: Family Trees

2.1: Clanranald



2.2: Camerons



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