

OLD CLUNY'S SWORD

By Ewen S.L. MacPherson

"He is the genuine type of the Old Scottish Chief, the Chief who loves his people, and speaks the language of the people, and lives on his property, and delights in old traditions, in old servants, in old services, and old kindly usages of all kinds."



On the 11th January 1883 at a grand dinner held at the Caledonian Hotel, Inverness, the Earl of Dunmore, Lieutenant Colonel commanding the Inverness-shire Highland Rifle Volunteers, entertained approximately 50 officers of the Battalion. A number of guests were present including Lord Lovat, Lord Lieutenant of the County; the Earl of Seafield; Sir Kenneth Mackenzie of Gairloch, Sir George Macpherson-Grant of Ballindalloch, MP and Colonel Ewan Henry Davidson Macpherson, later Chief of the Clan. The occasion was to recognise the considerable contribution that Ewen Macpherson of Cluny, C.B., Chief of the Clan Macpherson, known affectionately as Old Cluny, had made towards the Inverness-shire Highland Rifle Volunteers that he had been in command of from its inception over twenty years before. On retiring the command, Old Cluny was appointed Honorary Colonel of the Volunteers and at this special dinner was presented with a sword of "elegant workmanship" to mark the occasion. *The Inverness Advertiser* recorded a full account of the dinner, including the speech by the Earl of Dunmore, who presented the sword to Old Cluny and his reply - interspersed with 'cheers' and 'loud cheers'.

However, all of this was not immediately known when an e-mail by Mhuirich appeared on the Clan List on the Internet. It brought to the attention of the List subscribers that a Presentational Sword was for sale by 'Fine Antique Arms', an antique company in Texas, USA. It was described as "A very fine and rare solid silver hilted (silver gilt) Scottish Presentation Sword. The silver hilt, superbly sculptured with the foliage, including acorns, the crest of the

recipient and with the royal crown and bugle. All parts, including the pommel, stamped with the silversmith mark SJP, twisted wire-bound sharkskin covered grip. The single-edged blade with single fuller each side, etched with the royal crown V.R. amidst scrollwork. The ricasso, also etched the foliage and the blade maker's name, Firman & Sons Strand London. The scabbard, with panels of strapwork and foliage engraving, with the lower shape deeply carved with foliage and acorns. The lower section of the scabbard, engraved with 'Presented to Lieut. Colonel Cluny McPherson C.B. by the Officers and men of the Inverness-shire Highland Rifle Volunteers on his promotion to the rank of Honorary Colonel of the Battalion. Given in recognition of his service and as a mark of their personal regard 14th January, 1888'. Mhuirich made arrangements for the sword to be viewed on the Clan Association web site.

There was a great flurry of excitement on the Internet and it was agreed that efforts should be made to secure the sword by way of personal subscriptions. Cluny gave his support to the venture and steps were put in place to ensure that the sword was authentic. However, the date 14th January 1888 proved to be an initial stumbling block. Old Cluny died in 1885 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan Macpherson, C.B. Duncan had a long distinguished military career and died war-weary in 1886 shortly after retirement from the army. Ewan Henry Davidson, the second son, succeeded him. Ewan H.D. also had a distinguished military career. He was promoted to full Colonel in 1882 and in 1888 was still serving and in command of the Regimental District at Glencorse, Edinburgh. On retirement in 1890 he was appointed Brigadier General of the Highland Volunteer Brigade, a post he held until his death in 1900. A splendid photograph of Ewan H.D. as the Brigadier General, with over sixty pipers, can be viewed in the Clan Museum. There was no clan or military record of Ewan H.D. being awarded the Companion of the (Most Honourable Order of the) Bath (C.B.). A check with the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood at Buckingham Palace and the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle confirmed this.

It was established from item 135 in the catalogue of the sale of clan treasures at Cluny Castle on the 3rd May 1943 that a 'Presentational Sword, 1883, and two others' had been sold at that time. No further description was available and the 1883 sword was not purchased at that time on behalf of the Clan Macpherson and no trace can be found of the presentational sword from that date onward. Wylie & Lochhead, the auctioneers changed ownership several times and now operate as Funeral Directors. They have no archive records relating to their former business. Firman & Sons, the manufacturers, are no longer in business. A check with the Wilkinson Sword Group, the major company specialising in presentational swords in the UK today, confirmed that Firman & Sons existed in London during the 1880's but it was not one of the companies subsequently taken over by them. *The Inverness Advertiser* indicated that Messrs Ferguson & Macbean, jewellers, Inverness, supplied the sword - again this company no longer exists. The inscription on the scabbard given in the newspaper was similar but with slight differences from the one on offer. However, it was accepted that newspapers are not always totally accurate in their reporting.

It was confirmed from the regimental records at Fort George, Ardersier, that Old Cluny had been appointed Honorary Colonel of the Inverness-shire Highland Rifle Volunteers on the 2nd November 1882 having been the Lieutenant Colonel prior to that. The records also indicated that the regiment did not have an Honorary Colonel in 1888. In addition, it was known that Old Cluny had been presented with a special sword to mark the occasion, had previously been awarded the C.B. by Queen Victoria and was well regarded in the Highlands of Scotland. Alexander Macpherson, in *Church and Social Life in the Highlands*, records that at the Royal (Wet) Review in Edinburgh in 1881, at the age of seventy-eight, despite the fearful weather, the brave old Chief, with his courtly and soldierly bearing, was a conspicuous figure in the procession. He discarded even the use of his plaid as protection. Riding along Princes Street at the head of the Volunteers, Old Cluny was singled out for repeated rounds of enthusiastic

cheering. It also mentions in the *Glimpses* that on his retirement his regiment presented him with a sword of honour with an “appropriate inscription”.

It was essential to examine the sword and preferably by someone not emotionally involved in the investigation and purchase. We were fortunate that Jack Raines, editor of *The Urrlar*, lives in Texas. Jack, together with Tim Mason, a friend who deals in antique silver and armed with a magnifying glass visited and carried out a detailed examination. Tim concluded that the date was indeed the 14th January 1888. It was confirmed that the hilt basket was sterling silver with the handle in three parts, all made by the same craftsman. It was identified through silver hallmarks as being produced in London in 1882. The cat crest was confirmed as that of Old Cluny, added to the hilt basket as a separate piece and held in place by four, probably brass, silver plated pins and definitely original, having been braided into place. The braiding was contemporary with the 1880's. Tim identified the handle as sharkskin wrapped in silver-plated copper wire. The blade was made of steel and had traces of rust, believed to have occurred within the last few years. Therefore, it was established that the sword was made in 1882 and easily available for presentation in January 1883. We were satisfied that the sword was genuine and the one presented to Old Cluny at the Inverness dinner in 1883. The scabbard is certainly contemporary for the sword. However, we cannot and perhaps never will, be able to account for the date being wrong on the scabbard. A number of speculative theories could account for this, including a simple engraving mistake that was successfully camouflaged at the time with lead and subsequently exposed. This, we conclude, all adds to the mystery and intrigue of the sword!

The enthusiasm and generosity of association members resulted in the successful purchase of the sword. This is the first occasion anything from that line of the Clan Chief has been purchased for the Clan since the auction in 1943. The sword is currently on display in the United States and Canada. It will eventually find a permanent home in the Clan Museum and join the splendid silver candelabrum presented to Old Cluny and Lady Cluny by Clansmen and Friends on the occasion of their Golden Wedding Anniversary on the 20th December 1882.

CLUNY & SHEILA DOWN UNDER

by Edna MacPherson Sabato

Cluny and Sheila came to visit us. We can only hope they enjoyed their holiday, as much as we enjoyed their company. They saw only a very small part of our very large country, so, isn't that a good excuse to come back again sometime, to see the rest of it? We hope they will.

There are lots of memories - of Sheila finding a green frog in the loo, and Robyn having to get rid of it for her.

Of Cluny being scratched by the cat, “Funnel Foot”, and being told he should have remembered “Touch Not The Cat” !!!

Of both of them dancing the Chicken Dance, the Hokey Pokey, and that lovely new dance from the Western Isles of Scotland, “MacArena”, after which Cluny commented “You Australians are MAD!!!”

Of Cluny knowing how to switch the Piper off, with a glass of whisky, on the “Bounty”, out on Sydney Harbour, with the crewman slapping Cluny on the back, saying “Thanks a lot for that, mate!” in true-blue Australian style.

Of the 1931 International truck breaking down in Gin Gin, just when the Parade was about to start and having to make do with a Range Rover.

Of the sight of eighteen Massed Bands on the Oval at Bundanoon.

Of the walk behind the Piper, from the Australia Club to Parliament House in Sydney, with passers-by stopping to watch.