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## **“ON THE DEATH OF MARSHALL KEITH” AND THE CLAN CONSCIOUSNESS OF JAMES MACPHERSON**

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According to *The Scots Magazine* for October 1758 (536, 612) Field-Marshal James Keith of the Prussian Army was killed at the Battle of Hochkirchen on the 14th October 1758, and was buried the next day by the victorious Austrians in the chapel of Bautzen “with all the honours due to his rank”. James Macpherson's poem “On the Death of Marshall Keith” was signed *Ruthven, Oct. 31, 1758*, and appeared in the same issue (550-51). The alacrity with which he acted raises the question: why did an obscure young schoolmaster -- he had just turned twenty-two -- feel so strongly about Field-Marshal Keith? What were the motives that inspired him? Why Macpherson rather than some other admirer of the fallen hero?

The answer to these questions lies as much in James Macpherson's traditional beliefs as in his literary aspirations, and casts a stronger light on his perception of the world in which he lived than earlier studies of his life have provided. His political *weltanschauung* comprised, at that stage of his career, a covert Jacobitism and an essential pride in Scotland and its place in European affairs; both hinged upon his knowledge and understanding of his own clan's history and traditions. All three are present in the poem: explicit in the case of pride in Scotland (“CALEDONIA”), implicit in the case of Jacobitism and clan tradition, and all focused on the person of Field-Marshal Keith. Macpherson's first biographer noted that Keith's “memory was widely cherished”:

Macpherson did no more than express the admiration which Scotchmen everywhere felt for the man who carried the name and fame of their country to the uttermost ends of Europe. Mingled with this pride there is an undertone of the Jacobite sentiment still prevailing in many parts of the Highlands, and ready to respond to anything that called it forth<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson*, London, 1895, 48-49.

Revisionist literary critics have also recognized the Jacobitism<sup>2</sup> but as in the case of his biographer the motivating force of his clan tradition has escaped their notice. When fame and fortune brought him back to Badenoch in 1786 James was referred to familiarly as “Andrew McEvan's son”<sup>3</sup>, a double patronymic that corroborates what was recorded of his paternal ancestry at the time of his death<sup>4</sup>. James *bán* (“the fair-haired”) was born on 27 October 1736 on the farm of Invertromie, across the Spey from Kingussie, the fourth son and sixth child of Andrew Macpherson in Knappach and his wife Helen Macpherson. His father was the son of Ewan Macpherson, the eldest son -- but illegitimate -- of William Macpherson (1638-1712), Laird of Nuide, whose eldest legitimate son Lachlan became Laird of Cluny and chief of the clan in 1722. Andrew, therefore, was first cousin to Ewan Macpherson of Cluny, one of Charles Edward Stuart's celebrated Highland colonels in the 'Forty-Five Rising; he was also an active elder in the Church of Scotland between 1735 and 1752. Assuming that Andrew had no older brothers and that all three of James's elder brothers died in infancy<sup>5</sup>, and if his grandfather Ewan had been legitimate, James would have inherited the estate and the chiefship. Instead, his father was one of the “small” tenants on the conjoint farm of Knappach. Nevertheless, he was closely related to a number of the more influential tacksmen and wadsetters of the *Sliochd Choinneach*, the senior lineage of the clan<sup>6</sup>. He was also the offspring of a typically endogamous union, a marriage-within-the-clan: his mother was described as the daughter of “a respectable tacksmen of the second branch of the clan” [*Sliochd Iain*], identifiable as Bean (*Beathain*) Macpherson the younger brother of Alexander Macpherson of Strathmashie, grandfather of Lachlan of Strathmashie, James's second cousin and collaborator in the quest for Ossianic poetry.. With these connections he was undoubtedly schooled in the history and legends of his clan and conversant with the unpublished manuscripts of Sir Aeneas Macpherson of Invereshie (1645-1705).

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<sup>2</sup> Murray G.H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge, 1994, 181, and *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans*, Edinburgh, 1995, 36; Fiona J. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, Edinburgh, 1988, 46-47; Paul J. deGategno, *James Macpherson*, Boston, 1989, 18

<sup>3</sup> This phrase was used by Jean Grant, wife of Donald Macpherson of Laggan of Kingussie (formerly of Laggan of Nuidbeg) in a letter to her daughter Helen, Mrs Malcolm MacKenzie, at Belleisle Bay, New Brunswick, reporting their famous relative's arrival in Badenoch. Letter, 28 February 1788, New Brunswick Museum, St John

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Macpherson, *Glimpses of Church and Social Life in the Highlands in Olden Times and other papers*, Edinburgh, 1893, 255-56

<sup>5</sup> Ewan's marriage to Bessy, daughter of Alexander Clerk of Tullochmagerry, was recorded in Sir Aeneas Macpherson's manuscript genealogy, completed in 1705, but no children were ascribed to them. Of James' older brothers, Evan (Ewan, b. 1725) evidently died in childhood or youth, as a younger brother (b. 1747) received the same name. Nothing is on record for John (b. 1727) or Donald (b. 1733) beyond their baptisms, while both sisters married and had offspring

<sup>6</sup> They would include Lt. Lachlan Macpherson, brother of the exiled chief and tenant in the Mains of Clunie; Donald Macpherson of Cullinlean, wadsetter of Nuidmore; Lachlan Macpherson, wadsetter of Ralia; Andrew Macpherson of Benchar, factor to Lady Cluny; Donald Macpherson, wadsetter of Laggan of Nuidbeg; and Donald Macpherson of Breakachie, Cluny's agent in Badenoch, and his brothers Hugh of Uvie and Aeneas of Flichity. All but Lt. Lachlan were “out” in the Rising; all were ardent Jacobites

Sir Aeneas Macpherson of Invereshie was the senior representative of the Sliochd Ghillíosa, the third lineage of the clan. After a career as an Edinburgh solicitor and advocate, baillie of Badenoch for the Marquis of Huntly, Sheriff-Depute of Aberdeen, and a courtier at the courts of Charles II and James II, he was designated Governor of Nevis in the West Indies on the very eve of the Revolution of 1688. Thereafter he became one of the principal Jacobite agents in Britain, was imprisoned several times in both London and Edinburgh, and was threatened with torture by William of Orange's officials in the Edinburgh Tolbooth before banishment from both kingdoms. He found his way to the Jacobite Court-in-exile at St Germain-en-Laye where his daughter Mary married Sir John MacLean of Duart, a hero of Killiecrankie. In 1698 he returned incognito to Britain and lurked in London in great poverty till March 1702 when Queen Anne signed the Act of Grace and General Indemnity that permitted Jacobites to emerge from hiding and return home. During that interval in the English metropolis he wrote *The Loyall Dissuasive*, offering "Resolute Advyce [ . . . ] in a Memoriall to the Laird of Cluny in Badenach" concerning "the Chiftanrie of the Clan Chattan". It was dated "London, July the thirteenth 1701"; a *Supplement to the Dissuasive*, in response to "Remarks" by Sir John MacLean, was dated "Edinburgh, Sept. 12, 1704"<sup>7</sup>. According to Mrs Grant of Laggan, Sir Aeneas was still regarded "as the hero of his clan" by the generation which included James Macpherson<sup>8</sup>.

The *Loyall Dissuasive* was dedicated to "The Right Honourable the Earle Marischall", William Keith, the ninth earl and father of George, the tenth earl, attainted and in exile for his part in the 'Fifteen Rising, and his more famous brother, Field-Marshal James Keith. The dedication opens with a reference to "The great obligations my chief the Laird of Cluny, with his whole Clan and family lay under to your Lordship's most Illustrious father, the late Earle of Marischall" (George, the eighth earl), and assumes "the undoubted interest your Lordship has in the ancient and honorable family of the Clanchattan". In the body of the treatise Sir Aeneas insists that "the Illustrious family of the Keiths is come of the Clanchattan, [ . . . ] the Earls of Marishal have from age to age owned no less themselves". He reminds his chief, Duncan of Cluny, "that the late Earl Marishal [ . . . ] and his brother the Earl of Kintore vigorously espoused your interest for that very reason against the Laird of M'Intosh in your Debate before the Council [the Privy Council of Scotland, in 1672] [ . . . ] and after [ . . . ] the Earl of Kintore [ . . . ] owned his relation to your family"<sup>9</sup>. James Macpherson and his generation accepted as fact the notion that the Keiths were an ennobled branch of their own clan, and took pride in their kinsmen as Jacobites-in-exile who had added lustre to the ancient name, as well as to Scotland, on the broader European stage.

That the notion of a common patrilineal ancestry for the family of the Earls Marischal and the Clanchattan was common currency in 1758 is indicated by an account of the origins of the Keith family reported in the November issue of *The Scots Magazine* (611, 612):

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<sup>7</sup> Alan G. Macpherson, "The Clan Chattan Historians, 9-Historians of the Macphersons (Part 3): Sir Aeneas Macpherson", *Clan Chattan Journal*, VIII/3 (1985), 132-3 8, and VIII/4 (1986), 218-23

<sup>8</sup> "Letters Written by Mrs Grant of Laggan concerning Highland Affairs and Persons connected with the Stuart Cause in the Eighteenth Century", ed. J.R.N. MacPhail, *Scottish History Society*, XXVI (1896), 278

<sup>9</sup> "The Loyall Dissuasive and other Papers concerning the Affairs of Clan Chattan: by Sir Aeneas Macpherson, Knight of Invereshie, 1691-1705", ed. Rev. Alexander D. Murdoch, *Scottish History Society*, XLI (1902), 17, 19, 49-50,

The family of Keith, Marischal of Scotland derives its origin from the Catti, people of Germany, bordering on the Saltus Hircinus [the Hercynian Forest]. [ . . . ] in the time of Tiberius they were entirely routed by Germanicus. On this overthrow part of the Catti submitted to the Roman yoke, in order to retain their possessions in their native country, which is now subject to the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel who [ . . . ] designs himself Princeps Cattorum. But the most part, under the conduct of their leader Battus, left their native country and settled about the mouth of the Rhine, from whence that country was named Batavia --In the reign of Corbredus II surnamed Galdus, the Batavian Catti sent a colony to Britain. Being separated in a storm, part of them arrived in the Thames<sup>10</sup>, and the rest were driven to the northern parts of Scotland, and landed in that part called Cathness; which name took its rise from Catti [ . . . ] They remained in possession of the lands for upwards of 900 years, and spread out in several branches through the Highlands, which are at this day distinguished by several surnames, such as *Keith, Sutherland, Clanmhurich* or *Macpherson, Macgillivray, Etc.* under the general denomination of *Clan Chattan*.

The account goes on to ascribe the victory of Malcolm II's army over a Danish invasion force at Barry near Dundee in 1010<sup>11</sup> to "the valour of the Catti, under the conduct of Robert their chief", who was then knighted and created "heritable Great Marischal of Scotland":

The ancient name of Chatti, or Catti, came in time to be changed to Kethi, Keycht, and more lately to Keith, the present name of this ancient family.

The power of the legend was invoked in 1756, two years before the Field-Marshal's death, when James's older cousin, Ewan Macpherson of Cluny, wrote to the Earl Marischal, then Governor of Neufchatel in Switzerland, and to Field-Marshal Keith at Potsdam, to inform them of his recent escape to France. The Earl's reply wished the exiled chief "all happiness [ . . . ], taking a real concern in what regards you and your clan as being of the same origin, if old tradition does not fail". The Field-Marshal replied that he was "not ignorant of the connection and friendship which has long subsisted between our two family's and of which I had particular proofs myself in the year fifteen"<sup>12</sup>. James's great uncle Lachlan, then of Nuide, led the clan at the Battle of Sheriffmuir, a drawn affair which terminated the 'Fifteen Rising.

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<sup>10</sup> Although not named, this is probably a reference to the Catuvellauni, the British tribe which occupied the region northwest of London and opposed Julius Caesar in 54 B.C

<sup>11</sup> This is the same incident that Fiona Stafford, in *The Sublime Savage* (70), identifies as the basis for Macpherson's epic poem *The Highlander*, published in April 1758. One might speculate that the account in *The Scots Magazine* in November was submitted by one, James Macpherson

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Macpherson, "Gleanings from the Cluny Charter Chest", *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XXI (1899) 443-44. See also, Alan G. Macpherson: *A Day's March to Ruin*, Clan Macpherson Association, 1996, 228-29

The “old tradition”, as known to James Macpherson, can be traced back to *The Loyall Dissuasive*, where Sir Aeneas Macpherson provided a “History and Origin of the Clanchattan” identical in most particulars with the version in *The Scots Magazine*. It varies from it in describing the circumstances in which the title Knight Marischal of Scotland was created. In this earlier version, which Sir Aeneas heard from his grandfather, Sir Robert Farquharson, Laird of Wardes and Invercauld, and from Mr John Forbes, at a regents' dinner at Marischal College between 1656 and 1660, the occasion was a battle between the Scots and Picts in which the divided loyalties of the Clanchattan found them on both sides: their chief, Gillicattan-moir, sent one son “with the better half of the family” to join Kenneth MacAlpin and the Scots, and another to join the Pictish King (to whom he was related by marriage). The arrival of the pro-Scots faction turned the tide of battle and its leader was rewarded with the title, “of whom the present Earl Marischall and his illustrious family are lineally descended”; the pro-Pictish “rebels” were evicted from Caithness and resettled in Lochaber, where they emerge as the historic Clanchattan<sup>13</sup>.

Sir Robert Farquharson ascribed the story to “the book of Paisley as referred to by Buchanan”. The former would appear to be Fordun's *Scotichronicon* with Walter Bower's additions of 1447, while George Buchanan's history (1582) was based upon Hector Boece's *Scotorum Historiae a prima gentis origine* (1527), all of them sources based on legendary material and “more interesting as romance than history”. Sir John MacLean, Sir Aeneas's critic, concluded his “Remarks” on the *Dissuasive* by gently chiding his father-in-law - “You that are so fond of everything that is Cattanick” -- suggesting Cattana in Roman Sicily as yet another destination of the Catti: “But this would make you as vain as the M'donalds who would have all the families descended of theirs, in which there is ane (M) or any other letter of the name.”<sup>14</sup> The Rev. Alexander Murdoch, his editor, dismissed Sir Aeneas's account of the origin of the Clanchattan as neither brilliant nor trustworthy, and substituted the Irish St Chattan, a contemporary of St Columba, as the etymological basis for the saint's-name borne by Gillichattan mór, the eponymous founder of the Clan McGhillechatain or Clanchattan<sup>15</sup>. But the revisionist historians upon whom Murdoch relied post-dated James Macpherson as well as Sir Aeneas; it was his knowledge of *The Loyall Dissuasive*, and his acceptance of it as the undoubted authority, that compelled James to compose so urgently the elegy “On the Death of Marshall Keith”.

The power of clan connection with the Keiths was demonstrated again in February or early in March 1759 as reported in *The Scots Magazine* for February (96):

According to an article in the London papers of February 3, which is confirmed by a letter of March 5 in the Edinburgh papers, the Earl Marischal, who was attainted and has been abroad ever since the year 1715, has by the intercession of the King of Prussia [Frederick the Great] obtained the King's pardon [from George II] and will soon return home. These news have occasioned public rejoicings, bonfires, illuminations, particularly at Peterhead and at Ruthven in Badenoch. At the place last mentioned the principal gentlemen of the name Macpherson were joined by Mr William Blair minister of Kingussie to express their joy on this occasion.

James Macpherson had already left Ruthven and was tutor in the family of Graham of Balnagowan when this celebration occurred.

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<sup>13</sup> The Loyall Dissuasive, 73-75

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 108

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., lxiii, lxxii-lxxiii

On the 29th May 1759 George II issued letters patent to pardon George Keith, Earl Marischal, for high treason, and release him from the attainder under which he had lived since 1715. A year later his petition to be legally empowered to resume ownership of the family estates, which had been passed by the House of Commons on the 28th March, received royal assent on the 22nd May 1760<sup>16</sup>. These events undoubtedly excited the hopes of those families whose estates had been forfeited and annexed to the Crown following the 'Forty-Five, including James' kinsmen the Macphersons of Cluny.

The Scots Magazine, in its issue for August 1760, carried the following report (445):

The Earl Marischal of Scotland, envoy from the King of Prussia to the Court of Madrid, had his audience of leave from his Catholic Majesty on the 3rd of July. From Madrid he came to London, and was introduced to the King [George II] on the 16th August, and graciously received. On the 9th September he arrived at Edinburgh. Many persons of distinction have been to welcome his Lordship to his native country<sup>17</sup>.

James Macpherson was not one of them.

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<sup>16</sup> The Scots Magazine (May 1760), 254

<sup>17</sup> The report continued: "the magistrates of Edinburgh complimented him with the freedom of the city on the 15th [September]". Alistair and Henrietta Tayler were incorrect in stating in 1715: The Story of the Rising, London and New York, 1936, 227, that he did not visit Scotland till 1763

When the old Jacobite, the Field-Marshal's brother, reached Edinburgh, James was already engaged in his first Highland tour to collect ancient Gaelic poetry for his epic *Fingal*<sup>18</sup>. He appears to have set out in late August or early September, and was back in Badenoch late in October. He was absent, therefore, when his pindaric ode "The Earl Marischal's Welcome to his Native Country" was published in *The Scots Magazine* for September 1760. It could have been written in anticipation of the event at any time between February 1759 and early August 1760. The Earl Marischal, too, made a tour "to the west and north of Scotland" in September, visiting his family seats at Dunnottar Castle near Stonehaven, Keith Hall near Inverurie, and Inverugie Castle near Peterhead, and "returned to Edinburgh about the middle of October, and set out soon after for London". It is unlikely that their paths crossed. The poem undoubtedly carries undertones of longing for the return from exile of his older cousin and chief, Ewan Macpherson of Cluny, then in Dunkirk as a Lieutenant-Colonel attached to the Régiment Royal Écossais awaiting an opportunity to join in a French invasion of Scotland:

*Today their banish'd lord returns  
Once more to bless his native plains [ . . . ]  
Now the wished-for day is come  
Our lord reviews his native home [ . . . ]  
Dunnotyr's towers resound the peal  
That echoes o'er the hill and dale*  
But it was not to be. Great Britain and France signed preliminaries of peace at Fontainebleau on the 3rd November 1762, and Cluny died at Dunkirk on the 30th January 1764.

Three weeks after his death, on the 20th February, a public roup or auction was held in the old Scots Parliament House in Edinburgh to dispose of the forfeited Keith estates, at which the Earl Marischal's personal bid was unopposed at the upset price<sup>19</sup>. This was followed three weeks later by an event that went unnoticed in *The Scots Magazine*: when Cluny's widow, Janet Fraser, Lord Lovat's daughter, reached Edinburgh from Dunkirk and London in mid-March "not only her own numerous relations in that place, but severall others exprest the greatest assiduity to comfort her. Earl Mareshall, Lady Fife, & severall others of the first rank immediately waited on her"<sup>20</sup>. By appearing on this occasion the old Jacobite earl was surely acknowledging the claims of a distant kinship with the exiled chief as well as a common Jacobitism. James Macpherson, who also recognized such claims, was absent, filling a position in the administration of the distant colony of West Florida, newly acquired from Spain under the Treaty of Paris.

Initially moved to celebrate the death of Field-Marshal Keith and the homecoming of the Earl Marischal by clan consciousness, what Macpherson had then made of those events through elegy and ode became largely an expression of his literary ingenuity and cultural purpose.

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<sup>18</sup> Stafford, *Sublime Savage*, 116-17

<sup>19</sup> "Scottish Forfeited Estates Papers", ed. A.H. Millar, Scottish History Society, 1st series, LVII (1909) 355-56

<sup>20</sup> *The Scots Magazine* (October 1760), 551. See also, Alan G. Macpherson, *A Day's March to Ruin*, 243