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INTERCHANGEABLE SURNAMES AND PERSONAL NAMES IN SCOTTISH HIGHLAND REGISTERS AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFICATION

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The following article is a cautionary note for the benefit of persons who may be researching family origins in the Scottish Highlands. One of the causes for disappointment while searching Highland parish registers is the failure to recognise that traditional Highland families sometimes used more than one surname, and that most Gaelic personal names had an anglicised form and a biblical or classical equivalent which could be, and often were, used interchangeably. Unless a searcher is aware that this might be the case in a parish register of marriages and baptisms, much vital information may be passed over as irrelevant, results will be incomplete, and awkward and puzzling gaps in the family record will occur.

The best known example of the use of alternative surnames among the Highlanders is that of Rob Roy MacGregor alias Robert Campbell (1671-1734); his son Duncan MacGregor used the alias Drummond. The assumption of different alternative surnames within the same family, however, was peculiar to the MacGregors. The clan name had been proscribed by law in 1603, and various clansmen took protection under the cover of names like Campbell, Drummond, Graham, and Buchanan. Dispersing under the persecution of the law, some MacGregors took refuge with other clans with whom they had intermarried; several families, for instance, came to reside among the Macphersons of Badenoch in southeast Inverness-shire and assumed that surname for purposes of public transaction.

The more common case of alternative surnames can be illustrated from the registers of the Parish of Laggan in the headwaters of the Spey. Parishes elsewhere in the Highlands would undoubtedly provide other examples, peculiar to the vicinity. The Laggan community in the last quarter of the eighteenth century consisted of some 300 families; the dominant surname was Macpherson, men of that clan heading a third of the resident families. Other well-known clans were present in smaller numbers: MacIntosh, MacIntyre, MacGregor, MacDonald, Campbell, Robertson, Cameron, Fraser, Grant, and Stewart. Other less prominent surnames were also present. This composite social structure was typical of the Highlands and represented the true nature of the clan system as it operated in local land tenure, economic activities and politics. Within the Laggan community four cases of alternative surnames can be found in the Church of Scotland registers, each illustrating a different basis for the practice. The surname MacKay (to rhyme with 'sky') is a phonetic rendering of the Gaelic *MacDhabhaidh* or *MacDha'idh*, which translates 'son of David' or Davidson; MacKay and Davidson were used interchangeably in the baptismal register by the same families. Similarly, the surname McAlchynich or McGilchynich, a rendering of the Gaelic *MacMhaol Choinnich* or *MacGhillechoinnich* which translates 'son of Gilchynich', an old Gaelic personal name meaning 'the servant of St Kenneth', was interchangeable with the more recognisable MacKenzie. In one entry a baptising mother was identified as 'Katherine MacKenzie alias Nickilcheynich' (daughter of Gilchynich). MacKenzie, of course, simply means 'son of Kenneth'. The third example is that of families which used the surnames Cattanach and McIntosh interchangeably. In this case the basis of the practice was apparently political and more akin to that of the MacGregors. The fourth example concerns families called MacGilvantich, a rendering of *MacGhillemhanntaich*, 'son of the stammering lad', who also appear in the register under the simplified surname Mann, and also identified themselves as MacDonalds. Whether they were a branch of the Clan Donald or were simply taking protective colouring from a more powerful clan with whom they were closely associated is uncertain. In all these cases it can be argued that the

more recognisable and acceptable surname was a substitute for one that would have been regarded as quite outlandish outside the Highlands.

The same argument can be used in the case of personal names given to boys throughout the Highlands. In this case a name taken from biblical lore or classical literature, or from a famous character in European history, was substituted for the Gaelic-derived name. Thus Donald (*Domhnall*) was interchangeable with Daniel; Alistair (*Alasdair*) with Alexander; Angus (*Aonghuis*) with Aeneas; Ian (*Iain, Eoin*) with John; Murdoch or Murdo (*Muireach*) with Maurice; Farquhar (*Ferechar*) with Frederick; Duncan (*Donnach*) with David (or Dennis in Ireland); Ewan (*Eoghan*) with Evan or Hugh; Hugh (*Aodh*) with Adam; Hutcheon (*Huistean*) with Hugh; Hamish (*Seumas*) with James; Patrick (*Padruig*) with Peter; Sorley (*Somhairle*) with Samuel; and Gillespick (*Gillesbuig*) with Archibald. In all these cases, and perhaps others, searchers in Highland registers must be ready to recognise where a head of family appears in one baptismal entry as Donald and in the next as Daniel; the clues to a common identity are (1) the name of the mother - always her maiden name in the Scottish registers - (2) the sequence of baptisms following the marriage, and (3) usually the name of the farm residence where the baptisms took place.

The complexity that can occur in a single family history can be illustrated by the case of the author's great-great-great-grandfather. He was baptised Mories, son of James McPherson and Margaret Smith in Culloden, Parish of Inverness, on the 14th February 1761. He appeared as Murdoch McPherson, volunteer, when he married Janet Shaw in Inverness on the 6th July 1798, and reappeared as Maurice McPherson, taylor, at the baptism of their first son James in Inverness on the 25th April 1799, but as Murdow McPherson at the baptism of their second son William, 28th October 1801. On the 11th August 1809 he appeared in the Edinburgh register as Morice McPherson, 10th Militia, with his wife, at the baptism of their third son Morice. The Tenth Militia was raised in Inverness-shire and was stationed in Edinburgh to defend the coast between Leith and the English Border between 1803 and 1816 when it was disbanded; like all army units it required the presence of tailors within its ranks. From 1816 to 1827 he was listed in the Edinburgh City Directories as Morris McPherson, tailor in the Fleshmarket Close, High Church Parish, whence his eldest son James was married in 1820. A man with several versions of his personal name, he could only be identified as one individual from the circumstantial evidence of his wife's name, his occupation, and his association with the militia.