



CLAN LAMONT SOCIETY of NORTH AMERICA



The Highlander By Joe. D. Huddleston

The clans lived in a misty, mysterious mountain world rich in songs, battles, fairies, superstitions and strong passions.

Max Hastings, 1977

There is a tendency today to think of a Scotsman as one of a homogeneous culture of peoples residing within the boundaries of modern Scotland. Historically, this has been a recent development. Until the 1700s, the boundary between England and Scotland was a changing thing, often encompassing what is now Northumbria and occasionally Cumbria. And until the 1800s, the highlands were very much separate from the rest of Scotland, and certainly from England. For our purposes the highlands are defined as that area north and west of a line roughly from the town of Stonehaven on the east central coast of Scotland to Helensburgh, at the mouth of the Clyde in the south west, to include the isles, and for cultural purposes, the country of Antrim in Northern Ireland.

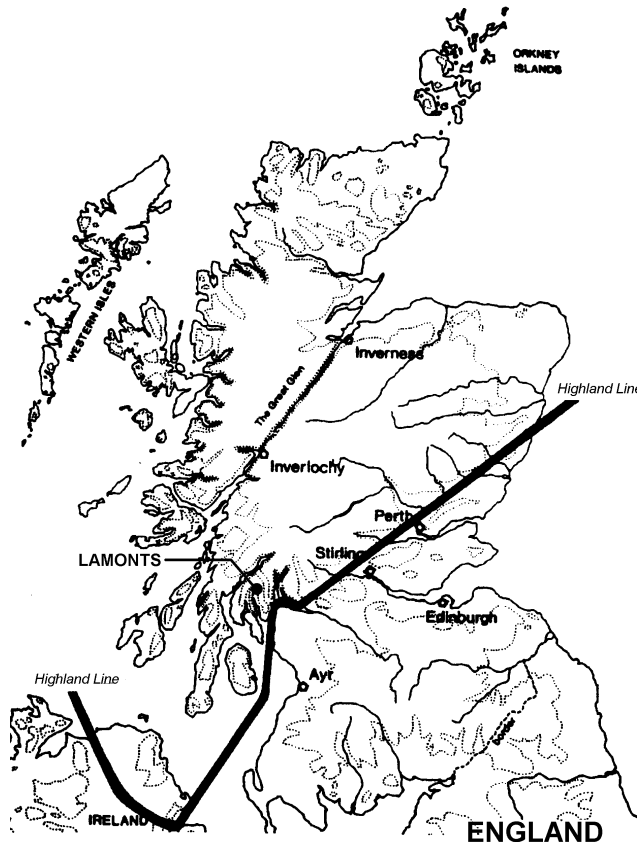
If you look at the accompanying map, you will see to the northwest of the highland line a great emptiness. The only town of any size in the highlands in the 1600s was Inverness, and even today the highlands and islands are the most sparsely populated territory in all Europe. In the 1640s, an observer commented ". . . people of all classes, do not generally reside in towns, but are scattered all over the land, in their own fortified dwellings, or castles, or palaces, or smaller buildings according to the custom of their nation." Part of this was due to the compartmentalization of the terrain by geography. The high mountain masses cut by innumerable glens, and on the west coast sea lochs, divided the land severely. To continue our observer's quotation;

"Besides, the country is cut up by innumerable torrents, streams, and rivers, the necessity of crossing which constitutes by far the greatest of our difficulties, added to the nature of the

ground and the hostility of our opponents, especially in the rigor of winter, when icy winds, with fast falling snow and the raging fury of the storm seem to blend sky and earth and sea into a chaos of confusion..."

This, combined with a total lack of roads and bridges, combined to make land travel harsh at best. Cattle trails and stream fords were the only overland tracks until a few scanty roads were built in the late 1600s to connect the English military garrisons. Only in 1726, under the direction of the British General George Wade, were any roads worthy of the name constructed

Put simply, the highlander was a totally different person from his southern neighbors. He was of Celtic stock, belonged to a clan, was Catholic, wore a kilt, and spoke Gaelic. Those to the south and east were Anglo Norman and Briton. They spoke English, were Protestant or Anglican, and wore the same clothes and carried the same arms as the English. This is not to say they were English, for the great lowland families had the same blood feuds and love of combat as the highlanders, as their reiving history attests.



However, the highlander and the lowland Scot were more different than the lowlander and the English. They were hereditary enemies. The lowlander was both fearful and disdainful of his highland countryman. At best the highlander was considered a noble savage, at worst a sub human, similar to the way the American Indian was regarded by early Europeans. For his part, the highlander had nothing but

disdain for his plow pushing neighbors, with their great houses, political intrigues, and subservient ways toward a king.

The highlander was an indigent who lived out in the back of beyond. Even in the climate of the 17th century, the highlanders

were among the poorest of the poor. They had no interest in making their fields more than marginally productive. The women and children tended subsistence kitchen gardens of kale, cabbage, turnips, onions and leeks, and beginning in the 18th century, that import from the new world, the potato. If they were fortunate enough to have been granted by their clan chief land that would support it, there might be a field of oats or barley, and some flax for linen.

Their wealth was in their stock, but even that was often in poor shape. They bled their cattle for food in the winter, and huddled with them in their turf or stone huts for warmth. There were goats for milk and cheese, sheep for wool, and shaggy highland cattle. All three contributed their meat and hides when they died or were slaughtered. And there were always dogs. A family with anything like a sizable herd was rich, even if they could not lay hands on a single coin of the realm. What coin they had usually came from the sale of meat and hides of game the man caught or killed, or of fish from the streams or sea.

As a hunter of the hills, the man often owned the only shoes in the family while his wife and children went barefoot. In the summer, the occupation was herding their cattle and getting full meals by hunting the plentiful game and fishing the streams. Unlike their town dwelling counterparts, they had plentiful clean water, but it was considered a poor beverage at best. The drink was ale, or for special occasions, whisky. Wine and other spirits were for the rich. Entertainment was individual competition, races or wrestling and contests of strength, such as are part of today's highland games, in the summer. In winter, dances, songs, poetry and bardic tales, fiddle playing and piping, today's ceilidh lightened nights that lasted 18 hours.

The universal garment of the highlander was an untailed length of wool cloth that served as skirt for the woman and kilt for the man. Particularly for the man, who spent much of his time outdoors herding or hunting (or raiding the clan in the next dale), it was also poncho, raincoat and sleeping bag. It was worn over a shirt of undyed linen that reached the men's thighs and a shift that was ankle length on the women.

The woman carried a "pocket," or purse, on a belt around the hips under her wrap around skirt, along with a small knife. The fabric was wool of her own manufacture, a piece about five feet square. She belted it around her waist, overlapped in front with the opening to the right so she could reach under the overlap for her purse or knife. That part of the garment above the belt was usually pulled over the shoulders like a shawl and fastened at the breast with a brooch that was second only to her husband's in value, if the family owned any at all. Everyone, male and female, carried a small knife for eating and utility. The other eating utensil was a wooden or horn spoon. Forks did not come into common use until around 1700.

The man's great kilt was a 15 to 18 foot length of heavy wool some five or six feet wide, much larger than a woman's because it had to serve more purposes. It was quite a process to put one on. First, a belt was laid on the floor and the kilt laid over it. A series of loose pleats were made over the middle of the belt to

absorb the excess cloth, until the two displeased ends were about two feet long. Then the man laid down on top of the pleats, overlapped the ends across his front, and fastened the belt. The kilt was usually worn quite short by the men, causing some scandalized comments from their lowland countrymen. However, when moving through the heather he was usually wet to the knees anyway, and it made sense to wear the kilt short. When the man stood up, all the excess cloth above the belt fell down loose. If he was to wear a jacket or waistcoat it was put on now, and then the excess cloth was twisted and pulled over the left shoulder to be tucked under the belt on the right side or secured at the shoulder with a brooch. If the highlander had wealth, this was where it was spent, and the man's brooch was his treasure.

The baggy blousing of cloth above the belt provided a place for personal items to be carried. In addition, the man's pocket, or sporran, was worn in front of the right hip, and his dungeon dagger and later his dirk were slung from the belt in the front center.

The highland clansman of the 1640s, during the English Civil War, was described by an English officer:

"All, or most part of them, well timbered men, tall and active, appareled in the woolen waistcoats and blue bonnets, a pair of bans of plaid and stockings of the same, and a pair of pumps on their feet, a mantle of plaid cast over the left shoulder and under the right arm, a pocket before the knapsack, and a pair of dirks on either side the pocket. They are left to their own election for their weapons. Some carry only a sword and large, others muskets, and the greater part bow and arrow, with a quiver to hold six shafts, made of the mane of a goat or colt, with the hair hanging on, and fastened by some belt or suchlike, so as it appears almost a tail to them. They had bagpipes, for the most part, for their warlike instrument . . ."

The knapsack mentioned in the quote was a square canvas bag with flap closure and a shoulder strap, that would have been slung over the left shoulder and carried on the right hip. His leaders, being clan chiefs and rich enough to own a horse, rarely wore a kilt, preferring trews instead. Like the highlander and his kilt in the heather, this makes sense. Riding a horse in a kilt could be pretty uncomfortable, particularly in the days when underwear was not yet thought of. At worst, the highlander accepted his poverty and hardship, and at best took a fierce pride in it. The highland clan differed from a primitive tribe only in that feudalism was overlaid on it, and the clan chief held the power of life and death over his people, with absolute control over his lands. The chief had an even greater sense of pride and self worth than his clansmen, even though his station was often not much better. Once, when MacDonald of Keppoch was asked his income, he responded proudly that when he sent his runners throughout his lands with the flaming saltire, 500 fighting men would rally to his standard. Obviously, he did not measure his worth in money.

The highlander took his possessions by the sword, held them by right of strength, and lost them when defeated. He was devoted to his chief as first among equals, but not subservient to him. Initially, when a chief was found wanting, his clan could replace him, in the Celtic tradition. Later, when chieftanship became

strictly hereditary, the chief ruled his clan within well defined restraints. He lost face and became ineffectual if he failed to bond in the brotherhood formed by common hardship and struggle. He was expected to maintain what for the highlands was a grand house, open always to his clansmen (clan means children) for a night's shelter and a meal. There was none of the formalized servility of an Englishman to his lord. The lowest clansman knew in his soul that he had as much right to sit at his chief's table as any laird. In return, the chief received his due from his chieftains and clansmen. However, it tended not be for him personally, but for the glory and betterment of the clan.

The Celtic warrior heritage was still dominant. If a man were to make a name for himself, it would be as a great and fearless fighter, a piper, or as a bard, but above all as a fighting man. Even among the elite of the clan hierarchy, if a young man were sent to France or the low countries to be educated, to be accepted at home he still must be able to compete with his clansmen as a hill climber and swordsman, and be their equal in bravery and the endurance of privation and hardships.

The highlander brought to any army he joined qualities that any commander would relish
amazing hardihood, fitness, strength, and a speed on the march that left their lowland opponents repeatedly stunned with surprise. Their culture instilled in them a reckless bravery and desire for personal glory that contributed to the famous highland charge, almost purely a Celtic hangover. They preferred to attack downhill in a screaming wave that ignored the presence of firearms. If they had muskets themselves, they tended to fire one volley, fling the gun to the ground, and close with pike, dirk, claymore and Lochaber ax, putting their ultimate trust in slashing steel and eyeball
eyeball confrontation. They fought for personal glory, family, clan and booty, in that order. King and country were concepts they left to their chiefs.

However, they were almost purely an offensive weapon, and a very fickle one at that. An old saying has it that "They run very fast both ways." If they sensed that this was the right time, the right leader, the right place, and the right enemy, they would attack regardless of the odds. When they did, at places like Inverlochy in 1645 and Killiecrankie in 1689, they were unstoppable. The panic this wave of screaming hellions caused in ranks of soldiers trained to exchange volleys with an enemy that fought in orderly rows was palpable. If the highlanders closed within sword's reach, all was lost, and the slaughter began. Little quarter was given, and the broken enemy was chased to ground, killed and stripped of everything of value.

But, the reverse was also true. It was chancy to ask highlanders to hold ground, or even fortifications. If they had any smidgen of doubt in their leaders, if they sensed the ground was not favorable, if the vigor of the opposing forces cast a question on the outcome, they would run just as fast the other way. In the highland armies, booty was usually the only pay, and when the clansman had all he could carry he went home. The tactical or strategic situation didn't matter. Thus, any time they captured a town in the days when rape, pillage and plunder were literally a soldier's due, the army invariably dissolved after the pillaging

was done. The highlander went home to share his booty with his family, and live to fight another day. Pragmatic, but not very noble, and it drove his commanders to distraction.

The following is a description of clansmen during the Jacobite uprising of 1715:

"...Stately fellows in their short hose and belted plaids, armed each of them with a well fixed gun on his shoulder, a strong handsome target, with a sharp pointed steel of above half an ell in length screwed into the navel of it, on his left arm, a sturdy claymore by his side, and a pistol or two, with a dirk and knife, in his belt...."

Even today, a dyed wool Scot takes offense if a targe is referred to as a shield. With a ten inch spike jutting from the center of the targe, it is an offensive weapon. A shield is something you hide behind. The highlander's Celtic ancestors fought naked because they did not want to be accused of cowardice for taking shelter in clothes that might hide armor.

From the 1500s onward, one of Scotland's greatest exports was its men. Anywhere there was a fight, there were Scottish mercenaries. After the Jacobite uprisings, the English took advantage of this combative people with the formation of the highland regiments. The rest, as they say, is history. With true military discipline overlaid on the highlander's natural fighting abilities, the highland regiments of the British Army have consistently been among the world's finest.

In the late 1700s, a ground swell of interest in the highlanders, their picturesque ways and their wildly beautiful homeland, began. This was fueled by the popular writings of Sir Walter Scott, who further embellished the noble savage image of the highlanders in his Waverly novels. The interest was made more practical by the improvements in roads and the coming of railroads, again so similar to the American Indian and the west. The movement continued to grow throughout the Victorian age, spurred by Victoria's personal love of the highlands, and continues to this day. Movies such as Rob Roy and Braveheart have stirred a new generation, even though Sir William Wallace, a lowlander of the gentleman class, probably would not have been caught dead in a kilt.

So, we have come full circle. Now in the popular image, every Scotsman's national dress is a kilt, and all Scots are considered one highland culture. Such was the nature of our forefathers.

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