

Introduction

Martin MacGregor

Donald Gregory was a scion of the astonishing Gregory dynasty which lit up the intellectual firmament of Scotland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries with its achievements in medicine, mathematics, science, philosophy and language. His father, James, in Robert Burns's estimation the last of the Scottish Latinists, removed the dynasty from Aberdeen to Edinburgh, where he held chairs in medicine, became first physician to the king, and engaged in an energetic and at times disputatious public life. History does not seem to feature seriously on the family radar before Donald. Two possible stimuli for his choice of vocation are a belief, reflected in his earliest researches and publications, in an ultimate MacGregor ancestry for his lineage; and the influence of his mother, Isabella MacLeod, whose father was sheriff of Ross-shire, and who seems to have played a significant role in the education of her eleven children. Donald, born in 1803 along with a twin brother, William, died tragically young in 1836, but had already seen five of his siblings predecease him. His death, on 21 October, must have been unexpected, for the preface to *The History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland, from A.D. 1493 to A.D. 1625, with a brief introductory sketch, from A.D. 80 to A.D. 1493*, is dated April 1836, and in it he looks to the future. 'It was my intention to have added a dissertation on the manners, customs and laws of the Highlanders, in which I had made considerable progress. Lack of space, however, has forced me to postpone, but by no means to abandon my design'.

Published more or less simultaneously was *The Highlanders of Scotland, their origin, history and antiquities: with a sketch of their manners and customs, and an*

account of the clans into which they were divided, by William Forbes Skene (1809-92). The two men were the moving spirits behind the Iona Club, established in 1833 ‘to investigate and illustrate the History, Antiquities and early Literature of the Highlands of Scotland’; ‘to supply an hiatus in the Historical Literature of Scotland which had long been observed and regretted’, and to take steps ‘towards substituting an authentic history of this interesting portion of Scotland, and of the literature, manners, and character of its inhabitants, for the fables and errors which have so long prevailed on these subjects’. Amplification of the second of these assertions came at the club’s third meeting in 1834, when an honorary diploma was conferred upon Patrick Fraser Tytler, ‘the author of a History of Scotland, now in progress, being the first work of the kind in which the History of the Highlands has been assigned a place, at all commensurate with the importance of the subject’.

The Iona Club’s research agenda was nothing if not ambitious. Through the publication, in instalments, of *Collectanea*, the club aimed ‘to bring together, in one work, all the documents illustrative of Highland history’. These would be complemented by *Transactions*, ‘devoted to brief dissertations and illustrative observations, arising out of the documents printed in the *Collectanea*; to extracts from, and remarks upon, various family histories, and similar works of *secondary* authority, but still containing many curious facts connected with the Highlands; and to short statements of the public business of the Club’. From the outset the club had a Gaelic committee, but in 1835, a committee was established specifically ‘to report on the propriety of publishing, *an edition of the select works of the best Gaelic Bards, with illustrative notes*, under the auspices of the Club’. All this enterprise did not outlive Donald Gregory. An Extraordinary General Meeting held on 17 November 1836 recorded:

that the Club regard, with feelings of the deepest sorrow and regret, the loss they have sustained by the lamented death of their Secretary, Donald Gregory, Esq. to whose talents and unwearied exertions on their behalf they owe so much, and whose loss will long be felt by them, as well as by all who were on habits of friendship with him, or take an interest in the history and antiquities of their native country ...

The Iona Club only ever met once again, on 15 December 1838, when it was agreed to cease operations because of lack of funds. Included in a recapitulation of its achievements was ‘the preservation of the valuable and extensive collection of documents made by the late Mr Donald Gregory’.

The 1830s marked the birth of modern scholarship on the history of the Scottish Highlands, and Skene and Gregory – trained for the bar, joint-secretaries to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and with maternal Highland connections – were its founding fathers. To them we might subjoin James Browne, whose *History of the Highlands and of the Highland Clans* appeared in four volumes between 1835 and 1838. Browne aimed to provide a ‘comprehensive digest’ of Highland history rather than fresh research, but explicitly aligned himself with the rationalism of Gregory and Skene, even if he rejected Skene’s line that the Highlanders were the direct descendants of the ‘northern Picts’.

Of what had Highland history consisted before 1836? During the seventeenth century, the ‘classical tradition’ of Gaelic history and genealogy, as practised in Scotland by professional learned lineages such as the MacMhuirichs, on behalf of the major territorial clans which patronised them, gave way before a genre of family or

'genealogical histories' which remained active up to the mid-nineteenth century. These histories were highly partisan accounts of the specific kindred to whom the author belonged or was affiliated, written in manuscript and nearly always in English, and drawing on a wide array of sources including oral tradition. In turn these metamorphosed into a 'clan history' genre which comes on stream in numbers in the late-nineteenth century, although the earliest specimen may be 'A Seneachie', *An Historical and Genealogical Account of the Clan MacLean* (1838). We can distinguish the clan histories from the earlier genealogical histories, partly because they are published works rather than manuscripts, and partly because their contents do not represent one 'pure' genealogical history, but amalgams of several such accounts, along with other material, such as fresh injections of oral tradition or documentary evidence. We might describe them as 'phase two' genealogical histories. Another genre which may have come to the fore in the post-Ossianic era, although its roots doubtless take us back at least as far as the late seventeenth century and figures such as Robert Kirk, Martin Martin and Edward Lhwyd, was Highland ethnology. Notable examples in Gregory's lifetime were David Stewart of Garth's *Sketches of the character, manners and present state of the Highlanders of Scotland* (1821), and James Logan's *The Scottish Gael: or, Celtic manners, as preserved among the Highlanders* (1831).

Skene's *Highlanders of Scotland* clearly paid homage of a sort to this genre, as would Gregory's proposed 'dissertation on manners', had he lived to complete it. The earliest reviewers of his *History* felt that the 'dissertation on manners' would probably have been a bigger hit with the reading public than a work which they saw as somewhat dry, localised and limited, even if likely to prove of substantial benefit to

future historians. It was a verdict which Gregory had anticipated in his preface, and from which he would not have dissented:

The necessity for minute research implied in a work like the present, has a tendency to prevent the author from drawing those general conclusions which are so desirable in all historical works, and which may occur more readily to those who peruse the result of his labours without any previous knowledge of the subject. This defect seems to be almost inseparable from the pursuits of the antiquary, who, in fact, generally acts as a pioneer to the historian. I shall be satisfied, therefore, if this work prove of service to a future writer on the History of the Highlands, and assist him in forming those general views which give to history its chief value.

Nearly two hundred years on, Gregory's *History* remains the best available narrative account of its chosen time and place. Explaining why involves more than the obvious cynical response that very few have cared enough to follow the trail he blazed. In settling on his subject, Gregory demonstrated a strategic vision far removed from the myopia of the antiquarian; the same vision that characterised the Iona Club's mission to ground Highland historiography upon secure foundations. He comprehended the history of the west Highlands in three great phases. The first was the Kingdom or Lordship of the Isles, dominated initially by the Scandinavians, and latterly, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, by the Clan Donald. The third was the era of military support for endangered Stewart monarchy, through the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, to Jacobitism. Both, in Gregory's estimation, had received adequate attention from historians, although he devotes a fifth of his book to a

corrective overview of the first phase. The second, from 1493 and the forfeiture of the MacDonald Lordship, to 1625 and the death of James VI, Gregory regarded as a 'perfect blank' which was all the more reprehensible for being in inverse proportion to the plenitude of the sources. The key theme was the series of attempts to restore MacDonald hegemony in the west, which ended in failure with the death of the last serious claimant, Dòmhnall Dubh, in 1545; and the struggle to fill the vacuum. The main contenders were the crown, the Campbell earls of Argyll, the Gordon earls of Huntly, and the MacKenzies of Kintail, and the main casualties were the MacLeods of Lewis and the MacDonalds of Islay – Clan Donald South – both of which were dismembered in the early seventeenth century.

Gregory set about filling the gap through a six-year research programme, launched by public announcement, and drawing upon a largely metropolitan web of archivists, antiquarians and professional Gaels, as well as the contemporary west Highland landed elite. He accessed the public records in London and Dublin as well as Edinburgh. To the modern Scottish historian, accustomed to the ready availability in printed editions of key governmental records such as the *Acts of the Lords of Council*, the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer*, and the *Register of the Privy Council*, it is humbling to read Gregory's numerous footnotes to the original manuscript volumes; or to note his extensive use of Highland material in the Denmylne MSS., housed in the then Advocates' Library, nearly a century before its publication in the Scottish History Society's *Highland Papers* series. Many landowners gave him access to their private papers, while his network brought into his personal possession nuggets like the confessions of those implicated in the assassination of Sir John Campbell of Cawdor in February 1592, accounts which contribute hugely to what is what is undoubtedly one of the highpoints of his *History*.

But Gregory did not stop with the formal documentary record. He was equally assiduous in his pursuit of ‘the traditions of the country’, garnered both from a rich harvest of the ‘genealogical histories’, and from information gathered orally either via his professional Gaelic contacts, or through regular fieldwork in the west Highlands. Gregory was as convinced of tradition’s genuine historical potential as he was alert to its propensity for error and exaggeration.

The resultant melding of sources has a distinctly modern, indeed post-modern flavour. In terms of Highland historiography it is redolent of the approach of later twentieth-century pioneers like William Matheson and Eric Cregeen. But this is only because, after Gregory’s time, and perhaps in part as a consequence of the institutionalising within universities from the late nineteenth century onwards of a split between Scottish historical and Celtic studies, tradition became a devalued historical currency. Approaching Gregory in terms of his own antecedents, we can see that he grows naturally and logically out of the genealogical histories, which also combined documentary record and tradition. Where Gregory leaves them and their successors, the clan histories, far behind is, firstly, in the scale, ambition and professionalism of his research programme, and his more systematic and critical attitude to the sources; and secondly, in his writing a general history which, although still clan-orientated – at three points Gregory halts his narrative to give surveys of the fortunes of all the major western clans – nevertheless broke decisively with the partisan ‘one kindred’ paradigm. The results are seen at their groundbreaking best in set-pieces such as the account of the battle of Kinloch-lochy or Blàr nan Lèine in 1544; the death of Sir John Campbell of Cawdor, which Gregory first demonstrated to be part of the same nationwide conspiracy which also resulted in the death of the

‘bonny earl of Moray’; and ‘the Great Rebellion of the Clan Donald of Isla’, in 1614-15.

It would be alarming indeed if the modern historian could not point to shortcomings in a work first published in 1836. Of the significant sources unavailable to Gregory, we might highlight the riches of the Vatican archives, and proper editions of the Irish annals. His use of the genealogical histories is at points over-credulous, as in the dates he takes from ‘MacMhuirich’ – the *Red Book of Clanranald* – for the deaths of two early sixteenth century Clanranald chiefs; or, more seriously, in his tendency to present as gospel what these texts say about succession to the chiefship of clans. Gregory makes a robust case for his decision to focus solely upon the west, although this may depend less upon the cohesion bestowed upon the region by its geography or history, and more upon the influence of Skene’s thesis that there was a racial distinction between the ‘Dalriadic’ Highlanders of Argyll, and the aboriginal ‘Pictish’ Highlanders of the eastern and northern mainland. In his preface Gregory says:

the history of the eastern highlanders cannot properly be blended with that of the western highlanders; and if introduced into the same work, would only serve to distract the attention of the reader ... the measures employed at first for their coercion, and afterwards for their advancement in civilisation, came naturally to be separate from those directed to the subjugation (if I may use the phrase) and improvement of the Eastern tribes.

This thesis still awaits proper scrutiny. Indeed a pernicious consequence of the quality of his *History*, for which Gregory cannot be held responsible, is that the history of the

late medieval west Highlands and Islands has come to stand proxy for the whole. It is striking, however, how often how his narrative returns to the strategic importance of the Great Glen and the fortresses and power centres along it; and to Lochaber as a crucible where east met west, as the dominance of the MacDonald Lords gave way to the competing jurisdictions of Argyll and Huntly, and their dependent kindreds. The forfeiture of 1493 and its immediate repercussions cry out for a broader Highland perspective, as does the reign of James VI where, for instance, the major pan-Highland acts of parliament of 1587 and 1594 barely register with Gregory.

The charge of lack of context can be applied equally to Gregory's presentation of west Highland history as something separate from that of the nation as a whole, which sits somewhat paradoxically with his criticism of Scottish historians for ignoring the region in their own accounts. The history of the Reformation, we are told, 'is to be traced almost exclusively in the history of the Lowlands; at least, the history of the Highlands and Islands presents little that is interesting on this subject'. We gain no real sense from Gregory of the wider fiscal issues which profoundly shaped the Highland policies of James IV and James VI. Gregory describes the ancestors of his eastern Highlanders as 'secured from any sweeping change, by the rugged nature of the country they inhabited', and it seems clear from comments elsewhere that he believed the same to hold true for the late-medieval west.

It follows naturally that Gregory believed in west Highland history as a slow and erratic voyage from rudeness to civilisation, and that the means by which redemption was to be delivered to these 'wild and remote districts', and the 'wild tribes' inhabiting them, could only be from without, in the form of Stewart monarchy and feudal law. The turbulent epoch inaugurated by the forfeiture of 1493 furnished him with no lack of data to paint a portrait of an anarchic society. Gregory attributes

the outcomes of the battles of Flodden and Glenlivet (1594) to Highland indiscipline, and refers elsewhere to ‘the usual system of indiscriminate plunder which characterised a Highland inroad’. Yet the construction of his narrative artificially enhances the mayhem. He notes periods of tranquillity – 1506-13, 1520-27, 1532-39 – purely in the passing, before moving on to the real business of the next eruption. It is here that we miss the counterpoise which his ‘dissertation on manners’ might have brought. We gain little sense of how society functioned; of whether it was changing, or capable of change; of how the MacDonald Lordship endured so long, and took so long to die. Instead we are left with ‘ancient and inveterate custom’, and its polar opposite, feudalism. Whereas modern scholarship increasingly emphasises a relationship between late-medieval Scots law and Gaelic custom and practice which was fluid, complementary, and capable of compromise, Gregory says that the succession of a MacLeod heiress in the mid-sixteenth century, ‘though quite intelligible on the principles of feudal law, was totally opposed to the Celtic customs that prevailed, to a great extent, throughout the Highlands and Islands’. By 1613, he notes ‘the greater progress made by the feudal system in the Highlands and Islands than in Ireland’.

Gregory’s *History* is structured around the reigns of the Stewarts from James IV to James VI, with five of the nine chapters devoted to the reign of the latter. This is true to his belief that effective Stewart monarchy was the best guarantor of progress in the west, especially when exercised *in propria persona*. It was through ‘free personal intercourse between himself and these warlike chiefs’ that James V ‘soon acquired as much influence in the Isles as had been enjoyed by his gallant and chivalrous sire’. The three long royal minorities of the sixteenth century had the corresponding effect of ‘retarding the civilisation of the Highlands and Islands’. Gregory passes positive

verdicts on most of the Stewarts, but his faith in the munificent and unbounded blessings of royal government nosedives initially with James VI, who is found distinctly lacking in 'the higher motives which have made some monarchs the benefactors of mankind'. James is rebuked for repeatedly aborting projected royal expeditions to the west between 1596 and 1607 due to his 'natural timidity'; for an over-reliance on lieutenants as royal surrogates; and for making crude and precipitate policy decisions to fulfil his 'golden visions' of the west as a rainbow's end which could save him from his largely self-induced 'pecuniary embarrassments'. After a decade of such blundering, it comes as a shock to reach December 1608 and James's instructions to the Commissioners for the Isles, and to read that these were 'productive of so much benefit, that from this time we may trace the gradual and permanent improvement of the Isles and adjacent Highlands'. The stage is set for Gregory's remarkable and highly tendentious presentation of the Statutes of Iona of 1609 as the fulcrum on which his whole history turns, the sole origin 'of that overflowing loyalty to the house of Stewart for which the Highlanders have been so highly lauded':

There is no room to doubt that the chiefs who followed Montrose in the great civil war were actuated by a very different spirit from their fathers; and it is well worthy of notice that this difference was produced in the course of a single generation, by the operation of measures which first began to take effect after the year 1609.

Subtlety is not the hallmark of the palette employed by Gregory to explain human behaviour and motivation. There is more than a touch of Victorian melodrama

about a cast of characters which includes 'bold and chivalrous' kings, 'numerous and warlike' clans, 'wily chiefs' and 'crafty barons'. Again we feel the lack of depth which the 'dissertation on manners' might have brought. Key and complex figures like Lachlan Mòr MacLean of Duart and Sir Seumas (James) MacDonald remain firmly one-dimensional. The former is 'early familiarised with scenes of blood and rapine', and has an 'innate disposition to violence'. Sir Seumas, a true tragic hero in the Dòmhnall Dubh mould, who spent much of his life striving in vain to reach a negotiated settlement with a government indisposed to listen, is poorly represented by reference to 'the natural violence of his temper', although Gregory does note later that his letters 'are not those of a barbarian, such as his indictment describes him; but, on the contrary, indicated a mind well cultivated for the period'. In the case of two earlier leading MacDonalds, Aonghas Òg and Dòmhnall Gallda, Gregory can find no better explanation for their conduct than insanity. Far more penetrating and interesting is his ambivalent portrayal of the Campbells. They are 'ancient and distinguished', certainly, and clearly seen as civilising agents, yet highly problematic in the scale of the power they accrue; an outcome neither anticipated nor desired by James IV, emphatically reversed by James V, but restored with interest come the reign of James VI, when Gregory lays at their door responsibility for the instabilities which afflicted the South Isles between 1600 and 1615.

We return finally to the indisputable fact that for all the cracks in the edifice wrought by the passage of time, Donald Gregory's *History* still stands. It has deserved to do so because it lets the evidence speak. Its author cared less for the sound of his own voice than for that of the sources, gathered and assembled by immense effort and 'minute research'. It is a privilege to pay homage to a true historian who did not

consider himself worthy of the name. His first and only book is both a fitting memorial, and a monument to what we have lost.

FURTHER READING

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