

Unlocking the charter chest: highlights from the Maclachlan family archive

These notes form the basis of a talk given by Dr Alison Rosie, Registrar, National Register of Archives for Scotland, at Castle Lachlan in June 2014 about her research into and cataloguing of papers held at Castle Lachlan. The Lachlan Trust is grateful to Dr Rosie and Euan Maclachlan, 25th of Maclachlan, for permission to reproduce the talk.

Legal documents

Legal documents going back to 1509 are well represented in the bundle of papers – mainly titles relating to property and land, but in amongst these are marriage contracts and bonds that also give an insight into Highland life and customs:

A charter/grant in favour of Alexander McDouthe Roye vic Allan of the lands of Portindrine in 1566 in return for which he gives Archibald Maclachlan a ‘cuddeich’ (a night’s entertainment due from a tenant) a kane weddir () herial horse and cow, delivering 20 cases of peat to the Castle, four sacks of thatch and two bolls of oat seed.

A contract between Lachlan Maclachlan of Maclachlan and William Mcintyre who agrees to become his piper ‘whenever demanded of’, health permitting, for the space of 11 years.

One of the fragile documents is the bond of amity and friendship between Lachlan Maclachlan, his kin and friends and servants and Archibald Campbell, provost of Kilmun, promising to support each other in all quarrels and actions against all excepting from the King and the Earl of Argyll. John Smollett, one of the witnesses to this bond, further adds that he excepts the King and the Duke of Lennox. Such bonds were very common at a period of lawlessness in the Highlands.

Papers relating to Lachlan Maclachlan and an episode of the ‘45

Lachlan Maclachlan joined Bonnie Prince Charles in 1745. In September of that year he and his men took away £740 from Patrick Hepburn of Kingston as arrears of cess due to the government. These papers relate to a court case between Robert Maclachlan, Lachlan’s son, and Kingston’s great nephew in the 1750s with Kingston claiming the money had been taken away by force. Maclachlan claimed it had not been his father but Stewart of Ardshiel. The papers include depositions by witnesses with their descriptions of the event:

- The witnesses describe Maclachlan as a thin man of middle stature and Colonel Stewart of Ardshiel broad in stature
- One said that the money was taken out of Kingston’s drawers in little pocks or bags, with little billets of paper on them like valentines
- The party is described as being in highland dress
- Some of them, ‘the baser sort’, took away household linen and napery
- Janet Darg said that she believed the party didn’t leave Kingston with a shirt as he came and borrowed one of her husband’s.

Rentals

There are a series of rental papers which can provide interesting information on tenants on Maclachlan lands. They run from 1687 to the mid 19th century. Many of the early rentals don't necessarily provide the tenants' names but only the place name together with the payments. Until the late 18th century payment was made partly in money (silver) and partly in kind: grain, eggs, hens, peat etc.

Argyll Fencibles

In 1759, the Duke of Argyll, along with the Duke of Sutherland, was commissioned to raise the first of the fencible regiments to increase internal Scottish defences and allow the regular army to fight in the Seven Years War. Colonel John Campbell, later the 5th Duke of Argyll, raised 1,000 troops in 3 months – by recruitment. It was disbanded in 1763.

Robert McLauchlan got his commission as Captain in July 1759. The records in the collection include an account of the (enlisting) money (1 guinea – one pound one shilling) given out to the recruits and subsistence money (3s per week). There are 60 attestations, i.e. the declaration that the recruit was a Protestant, was in good health, had voluntarily enlisted for three years, and that he had received his enlistment money, taking the oath to serve the King. Of the 60 attestations, the recruits are mostly from Argyllshire, 15 from the parish of Strathlachlan. The majority are under 25, are illiterate and mostly labourers. The youngest is Rory Mackenzie from Redcastle, Inverness-shire, a boy of 14. The attestation shown is that of Lauchlan Maclachlan. As well as some of Maclachlan's paybills, there is a list of casualties – that is, men who were discharged, deserted, died or were transferred – showing that quite a few deserted.

Hope Estate plantation

One paper is a list of the slaves on the Hope estate - a coffee plantation in Dominica. The document lists 76 men and 51 women with some interesting classical names given to the slaves.

The Wars of Independence had put a stop to the tobacco trade in America and the Glasgow tobacco lords moved their attention to the West Indies.

The Hope estate was part owned by John Campbell and his brother Thomas Campbell, both merchants in Maryland. John went on to found the firm John Campbell Senior & Company which traded, mainly in sugar, until 1858. There is a letter in the Maclachlan collection from John Campbell to his brother Colin, written from Maryland in 1770, pointing out that as he thinks the tobacco trade is too precarious, he is planning to move to the West Indies.

The collection includes a certificate stating that the boy Nick, formerly the property of Mr Alexander Scott and lately sold by Dr Patrick Smith to John Reid, is well worth the price of £95, 18 December 1784.

The Campbells, John and his brothers Thomas, Mungo and Colin, all did very well out of the West Indian business, purchasing estates in Scotland. Colin Campbell of Park's daughter married Donald MacLachlan of Maclachlan. Mungo Nutter Campbell married Amelia Maclachlan.

Argyll

One of the meatiest sections of the correspondence in the collection is that of George Campbell, as Lord Lorne and then 8th Duke of Argyll.

He was quite a character, with strong opinions. Topics covered in his lengthy correspondence with Robert Maclachlan included issues relating to the Disruption of the Scottish church and the issues of land for churches and schools for the Free Church; the indebtedness of the Argyll estate when he and his father took over; political issues at Westminster relating to free trade, political reform and, more locally, roads, bridges and railways.

In the second half of the 1840s and early 1850s, the question exercising him was the starvation of the people on Tiree and in the West Highlands because of the failure of the potato crop. For him, emigration was the only permanent remedy.

There are also references to two attempts on the life of Queen Victoria.

The correspondence touches on the Queen's proposed visits to Taymouth, 1842, and to Inveraray, 1847. We learn something of the former but not the latter from the papers.

The 7th Duke sent an invitation to Victoria and Albert to visit Taymouth in 1842 but this was unsuccessful – it was too late to insert into their proceedings. Lord Lorne proposed that a corps of men in Highland dress would be in attendance, with him at the head. Islay intended to bring 500 men with Lochaber axes. Each group was to be kept in order by a gentleman of the district from which they came. He noted:

“Whisky among so many highlanders might play the deuce unless there be strict superintendence.”

St Kilda

This is quite possibly the earliest list known of the inhabitants of St Kilda. It is dated 15 June 1764 and lists 90 people.

In the 1760s and 1770s, reports on the number of people living on St Kilda varied but the Reverend John Walker visited the Hebrides in 1764 on behalf of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge and wrote it up in 1771, mentioning 90 people on St Kilda. He was not able to visit the island because of bad weather. Many of these families would have originated in Harris and would have been brought over to St Kilda after the smallpox epidemic earlier in the century had decimated the population.

Each person ate, apparently, 36 wild fowl eggs a day and 18 fowls (seabirds).