MARCH TO INVERLOCHY

MACDONALDS & CAMPBELLS JOIN IN A FUND-RAISING RE-ENACTMENT

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Report: JACK WILLS

Photographs: IAN HOSSACK

When the army of the Marquis of Montrose streamed over the plain at Inverlochy to fall upon the Marquis of Argyll's forces in the gloom of a February morning they were assured of a place in history. For, after marching almost 40 miles over mountains and through bogs and torrents, the 1500 Royalists were poised to attack before the enemy knew they were there.

When they stormed into action, Argyll's army was swept from the field. Nearly half of his 3000 troops died while he escaped down Loch Linnhe in his galley.

Since that day in 1645, historians have theorised and argued, not about the battle, which was Montrose's genius and the fighting spirit of his men, but about the route taken on the approach march.

From the moment his army took to the hills above Cille Chuimein, now Fort Augustus, where the march began, Montrose relied on local clansmen, notably Iain Lom the Bard of Keppoch, to avoid the easily-watched Great Glen. But it seems that the historians never consulted the clansmen or their descendants.

This was a mistake, for recently some of these descendants drew on a wealth of family histories and their knowledge of the country to re-enact the march on its anniversary. They demonstrated in astonishing and dashing style that the great traditions of courage, stamina, and natural leadership are alive and thriving in Lochaber.

Twelve men stood on the bank of Loch Uanagan, near Fort Augustus. Dawn was breaking on the leaden sky over the Great Glen.

On or near that spot 341 years before, the Marquis of Montrose had to decide whether to go north and confront the Earl of Seaforth's 5000-strong army or turn south to attack the Marquis of Argyll's force camped at Inverlochy, now part of Fort William.

His decision to take his Highlanders, Islemen, and Irish over the rugged country by Culachy, Glen Roy, and Spean to Inverlochy was the beginning of a legend. And the 12 men were there to honour that legend and the men of both sides who died in the battle.

Nine had family connections in the area which can be traced back for centuries. One, carrying a 5ft claymore he made himself, was descended from Irish MacDonalds who fought for Montrose under Alasdair Colkitto MacDonald of Colonsay. The others were a Balquhidder MacGregor and an Athollman.

The march was organised by a Glen Roy crofter, Ronald Campbell, whose branch of the clan settled in Keppoch in the fifteenth century when they became bodyguards, pipers, and foster-parents to MacDonald chiefs.

It quickly took the form that was to be maintained throughout with shepherd Alasdair MacDonald and farmer Willie Shaw breaking the trail through soft snow to Culachy heights with a rhythm of movement that only those who spend their lives on the hills can achieve.

The marchers swiftly brushed through clumps of birch trees dotting the bogs and snow banks that led to Culachy boundary where Robin MacGregor broke off to attend to his shepherding nearby.

As they dipped down to Glen Buck and up the Allt na Larach the pace did not slacken although the strong east wind began to bite and blown snow danced on the existing drifts.

A herd of startled hinds floundered away towards Carn Dearg. Benavie headmaster Edward Hunter plunged waist-deep into a snow drift. "Could someone please give me a wee hand out of here?" asked this descendant of the Arkaigside MacMillans politely.

At 2000 ft. snow showers swept the tableland. Harry MacDonald's red hair turned white with rime. The kilted Athollman's legs took on a purple hue. The sling used for carrying the claymore broke and the sword tripped Bill MacHugh, the galloglaigh, who fell flat on his face. "I'm not at all cold," said the Athollman loftily, "the kilt is an underrated garment." But he was carrying a pair of heavy longjohns in his pack just in case.

After six hours, the marchers were at Allt Lairig Moire looking down into Glen Turret, taking a break because they were ahead of schedule.

All agreed that it was one thing for well-fed men with light packs and reasonable weather to make a fast time, but entirely another for Montrose's ill-clad hungry 1500, battered with sleet and carrying heavy weapons.

Then, as hoodies cried out in alarm, the marchers bounded down the steep east slope in a shower of snow, crossed Glen Turret at Allt na Teanga Bige and, spurning Wade's route, climbed on to the first parallel road, one of Glen Roy's geological wonders.

Here they were joined by Kevin Dignan, descendant of Alasdair Buidhe, 14th Chief of Keppoch and Maclain of Glencoe. Kevin, Scottish Senior Schoolboy Motor Cycle Champion for the second year running, and shepherd Alasdair Macintosh were the youngest marchers as they approached the ancient township site of the Briagach, a mile north of Achavady.

Here Montrose's army received reinforcements of Glen Roy men and it is inconceivable that they were not also given hospitality by the friendly inhabitants of Lickroy, Annat and the 14 hamlets which existed there at the time. Deer would be down in the hard weather and oats would be available.

The 1986 marchers feasted on such traditional fare. Mrs. Ann MacDonell, the "Chief of Staff" who researched the project, had made a huge pot of soup from venison, mutton, and beef. Ronald Campbell's sister Ishbel had baked enormous quantities of oatcakes and Mrs. Joy Munro, a Leanachan Kennedy whose husband Billy was on the march, and Mrs. Kate MacDonald of Inverroy kept the food flowing in a crowded wool shed.

Montrose's army spent several hours at Achavady awaiting darkness to conceal their crossing the Spean, but the 1986 marchers were off again in less than an hour.

A dram was taken at the Briagach's sharpening stone, said to have been used by the Royalists to put an edge on their swords, then it was off to Caol Lairig, the ancient pass from Glen Roy to the west.

Immediately, Willie and Alasdair led a group including Alasdair Wardlaw 500 ft up the slope to the top parallel road at a killing pace. Someone suggested to Ronald Campbell that they were going too high. "They're just having a stretch after the food," he replied. "We'll meet them at Allt Ionndrainn." Which is what happened.

Darkness fell as the marchers left Allt Ionndrainn — the wandering burn? — and went south-west into a new forestry plantation where slush, bogs, and bushes slowed the pace. No-one was sorry to quit the plantation for the gentle fields leading down to the Munros' house at Foich where more hospitality waited.

Also waiting to join the march were the Munros' sons Graham and David and Kenny Mackintosh. They had travelled to Skye that morning, played a game of shinty and returned immediately after.

At 10 pm the 15 marchers were pushing through bramble thickets and wading burns in pitch darkness to the ford on the Spean at Dal nam Beithe.

There they surged eagerly into the icy black water. Nimble feet sought purchase on the huge boulders concealed under the swiftly-flowing river. Soon all had covered the 50 yards and were scrambling up the bank on numbed legs.

Minutes later in Angelina Campbell's barn at Coirechoille repairs to person and gear were carried out as drums appeared and songs were sung in two languages. They would stay there until 3 am in order to arrive on Inverlochy battlefield at the same time Montrose had. No-one slept. A young marcher was emptied head first out of his sleeping bag amid yells of: "Montrose's men didn't have these things."

About 2.30, one or two sank on to fleeces dragged from a corner of the barn. But not for long. One more song and all trooped out silently for the last nine miles.

The march up the Cour burn was a nightmare of lashing branches, clinging slush, and treacherous ice patches. Ronald Cameron, son of an Inverroy crofter, crashed to the ground with a bone-jarring impact that would have ended the march for most people. Ronald got up and walked on without a word.

David Munro, burdened with six large flasks of soup, told his companions: "Drink it or dump it." They drank it.

The going was no better along Allt an Loin but soon the clearing of Lenachan showed through the trees. From there it was an easy walk along forestry roads with time to reflect. All the locals were seeking to raise funds to repair the ancient church of Cille Choirill. Iain Lom, the only Gaelic poet laureate, lies there. Another hero, red-haired Ewen Mackintosh is buried in a place of honour behind the door. Fighting at Culloden, his musket ball still lodged in his shoulder from the Battle of Falkirk three months before, he had his legs shattered with grapeshot. He was slung over a pony and taken home to die. He was an ancestor of Kenny Mackintosh, Alasdair MacDonald, Ronald Campbell, and Alasdair Wardlaw.

Bill MacHugh, a Glasgow school teacher who carried his claymore to Inverlochy, was collecting for the church as a way of thanking the Lochaber folk for the hospitality he gets when he camps in Glen Roy with his family. The Atholl-man believed places like Cille Choirill should be preserved, but he was also making a protest against the BBC's failure to mention the Highlanders in their TV series Soldier. He asked Ronald Campbell if he did not think it strange that someone with his name had organised the march. "Not at all," said Ronald. "My father's people have been in Lochaber since the fifteenth century. My mother was a Glencoe MacDonald, and my mother is descended from a long line of Glen Roy MacDonalds. Four long Roy Campbells served in the Keppoch Regiment in the 1745 Rising."
With Alasdair and Willie still leading, the marchers swung out of the woods and on to the golf course overlooking the battlefield. It was dawn on February 2. They were right on time after nearly 40 miles and 24 hours without sleep.
"Could you fight now?" asked a member of the welcoming party. Of course. After all, Willie Shaw would be playing badminton that night. But instead, Catholic and Protestant stood together in the bitter wind to hear a message of peace and goodwill from Father David Trainer who, despite illness, had driven from Glasgow to be there.
As a group of young marchers walked to the vehicles waiting to take them home, an onlooker said to Ronald Campbell: "They are a great bunch". "They are that," said Ronald, "but it is sad that none of them owns one acre of the land they live in."

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Recent research has discovered that at Inverlochy the credit for victory of Montrose's royalist forces should be shared by Alasdair MacDonald, son to "Colkitto" MacDonald of Colonsay who has been credited with the invention of the Highland Charge. (See "Alasdair MacColla" by Stevenson, John Donald pub).

A map has been added to the article by your editor in order to clarify the route of march approximately.
Thanks are owed to the editor of the Glasgow Herald for sending pictures without charge when giving permission to reprint the article. The evocative writing of Jack Wills and atmospheric photographs of Ian Hossack are in the finest tradition of Scottish Journalism.
"A herd of startled hinds" were female red deer. "Galloglaigh" or gallowglass were highland mercenaries who fought in Ireland or vice versa. The parallel roads of Glen Roy are horizontal glacial scars at various levels on the hills. "Then, he bodies cried out in alarm". Hoodie crows are a large grey backed species of scavenger bird who have been known to feed on live sheep caught in a bog or drift.
For Cille Choirill and Ian Lom see the article on member Mary Campbell's fund-raising efforts. She is a cousin of Ronald Campbell, the organiser of the march.

Photograph captions

Ronald Campbell leads the band of marchers across the bleak terrain of Glen Roy.

A claymore is raised again in Glen Roy: Bill MacHugh from Milngavie (pron. "Mulguy") silhouetted against the winter landscape with his home-made weapon.