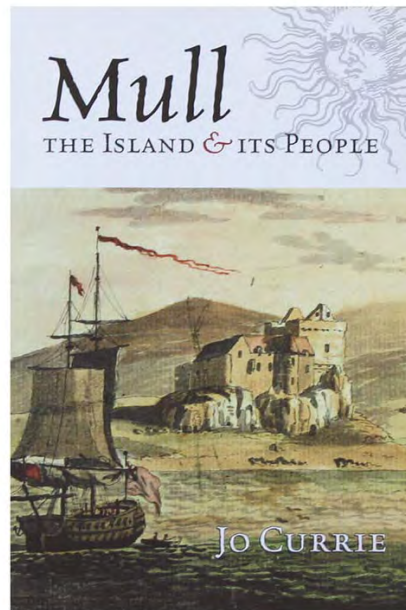




# **From Mull to Munlochy**

## **Stepping from the known to the unknown background in understanding local history**

by Jo Currie



13th January 2022  
Zoom lecture series no.4

Society for Highland & Island Historical Research  
<https://www.highlandhistoricalresearch.com>

## **Synopsis**

This talk was about the childhood inheritance that made the author want to look deeper into the background of Mull, and how that had a bearing on the people she chose to write about. How working in bookshops, university libraries, publishing, and even the shadowy world of ghost writing led inevitably to an obsessive interest in the history of Mull individuals and the creation of a card file of names which were waiting only to be explained and fleshed out by two of the most outstanding collections of manuscript letters ever to reach the safe havens of British Record Offices.

In this talk, Jo speculated about the long lives that would be required to do justice to such information, and then, because the two enterprises under examination are so different, Mull so familiar, Munlochy at first a mere name, but a place in the Black Isle not unknown, this talk surveyed all the means of discovery, given the tail end of a life only. She also appealed to listeners for help in finding future historians who may be able to step in to secure the survival of an extraordinary heritage.

MULL – MUNLOCHY.

Jo Currie



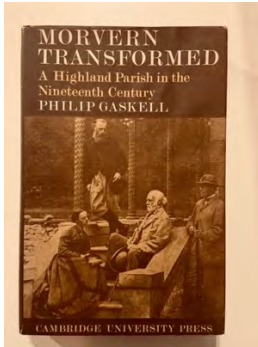
First Investigations

I want to tell you right at the beginning, if you don't already know or suspect, that I'm not a real Historian.

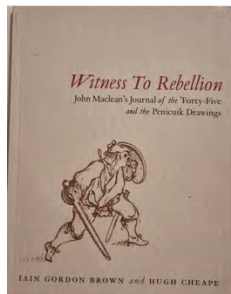
I've mainly worked with books, in bookselling, publishing and in university libraries.

Someone once asked if I was "one of these librarian-historians", which sounded rather derogatory.

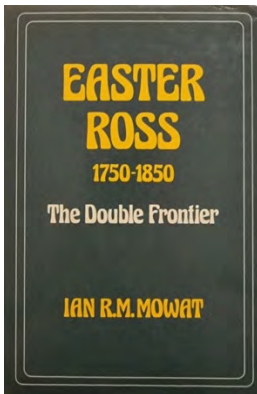
There have been quite a few librarians who have written about Highland history. The first to impress me was Philip Gaskell, who wrote *Morvern Transformed*, a book which brought Morvern out of its obscurity and into the forefront of what was called 'the Country'.



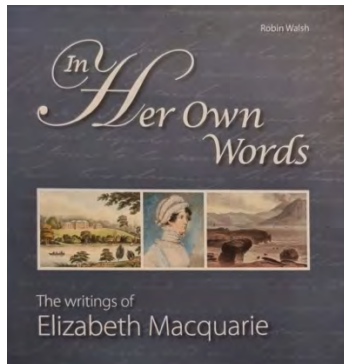
Iain Brown Keeper of Manuscripts in the National Library in Edinburgh produced, with Hugh Cheape, *Witness to Rebellion*, the journal of John Maclean, among many other learned books about outstanding holdings in the NLS and elsewhere.



In Edinburgh University Library, we had, as Librarian, Ian Mowat, author of *Easter Ross* from 1750 to 1850, whose reign at Edinburgh was tragically short.



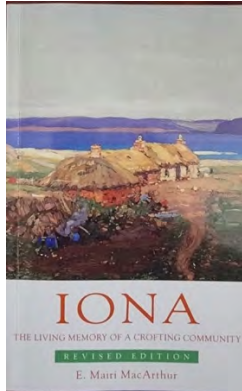
And someone very important in the history of Mull was Robin Walsh of Macquarie University, Sydney,



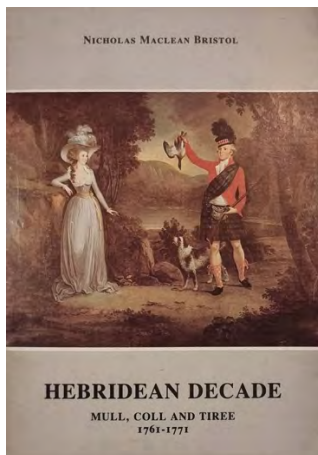
...whose study of the life of Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales, included Macquarie's wife, Elizabeth Campbell of Airds.

Another privilege in being “one of those Librarian-Historians” is getting to meet interesting readers who share your interests, for it was in the library that I first met Jean Whittaker, later to be one of my Mull publishing team in Tobermory, Keith Sanger, studying the Kintyre harpists, my own ancestors,

McOshenaigs in Lephenstrath, Alex Murdoch who introduced me to Argyll Colony publications, Ronald Black, whom we all know, Mairi MacArthur, completing her book on Iona,



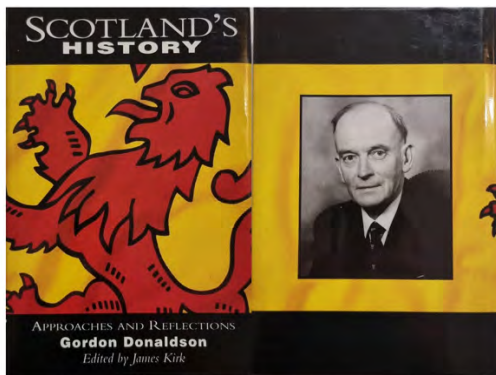
and Nicholas Maclean Bristol who had recently produced *Hebridean Decade*.



A professor of Anthropology from the University of Missouri, discovered that the island of Colonsay had a higher rate of twin births than I think anywhere in the world. He came to us to look at the Carmichael Watson Collection and found a great deal to interest

him in the life of Donald Mackinnon, the first Professor of Celtic in Scotland. Professor Mackinnon, who served as a member of the Crofters Commission, became John Sheets' main interest, and off John went to Colonsay to pursue his subject.

In my own student years at Edinburgh University, reading English and French Literature in the early Sixties, I chose Scottish History as an incidental, and sat in the front row before the newly appointed, stern, spartan and unforgiving Professor Gordon Donaldson. He was quite frightening then, but recently I have been reading a collection of his essays, *Approaches and Reflections on Scotland's History*,



and have been chuckling at the surprising humour of his observations, for in his own dry, severe way he is delightfully funny - funny and frosty - especially when his reflections are contrasted with latter-day received wisdom. For example, in this book he always

puts the word CLEARANCES in inverted commas. The copyright date of 1995 may give you a clue about how to interpret this comment, for comment it certainly is.

James Kirk, in his biography has gone into detail about Professor Donaldson's favourite aversions. One was the former Chancellor Norman Lamont's apparent approval of the pronunciation of his surname as LaMONT. As a descendant of Mull Lamonts I am entirely in tune with this aversion. Another of Professor Donaldson's favourites, and he seems to relish them, is, and I quote:

*One of my favourite aversions is oral tradition - Enquirers about their pedigrees are often exhorted to begin by consulting the older members of the family - a very dangerous thing to do. Such persons may indeed make useful suggestions about residence, or occupations, which may be marginally helpful by pointing the way to possible record sources, but beyond that I WOULD NOT TRUST IT A YARD.*

Needless to say I found this amusing because it was how I began - by consulting an older member of the family. My grandmother, a lady born in Kintyre in



1865, of a Highland Gaelic-speaking family, and then taken to the island of Coll where her father, a stickit minister, was invited by the new proprietor, Mr Stewart, to be rent-collector, postmaster and shopkeeper. His daughter sat down at my request when I was 11, and gave me the names of everyone in her family from 1735. Knowing nothing of Professor Donaldson's caveat in those days, I drew up a tree of her family, and her husband's. Twenty years later, when I took the Mull tree to Register House in Edinburgh they were found to be accurate. So much for the professor's pet aversion.

But just to explain. The grandparents had come to Mull in the 1920s upon my grandfather's retirement from the sea. He'd been all over the world in the Merchant Service. They had lived in Campbeltown, but, born on Iona, brought up on Tiree, he plotted to return to the ancestral home. Given the chance of a Post Office in the Ross of Mull, and with his MacPhail cousins not budging from the Iona one, he uprooted his three unmarried children to do all the work, and settled near the Argyll Arms. His forebears had been either schoolmasters or postmasters. His great grandfather Allan Lamont had been a schoolmaster, but had been forced to emigrate to Upper Canada when he joined the Free Church.



(The family walking in Oban, c. 1940)

To the Post Office house my parents went every year. My father, in a reserved occupation with Scottish Aviation at Prestwick from 1939 had only a fortnight's leave. When married teachers were needed my mother went back, so that after my fifth birthday I was often left for the whole of the two-month summer holiday, with her family. My brother was too young to be left.

But what has all this to do with the history of Mull? you may be asking. Many real historians are real natives of Hebridean islands, not simply visitors. But I must make a case for the perceptions of grandchildren. Visiting provides a contrast – a great

many whys and wherefores. Would you ask why there were ruined houses if you had grown up with them? Furthermore, my parents, being visitors were treated to many stories about the local people, not only provided by post office clientele, but given an extra dimension by my great-uncle John being schoolmaster, and my great Aunt Mary, dressed like Mary Poppins, a lady of extreme dignity who had married a Torosay MacPhail. In 1940, my aunt Lisbie, who had lost her fiancé in the Great War, married a crofter whose family a hundred years before had been moved out of Mr Clark's Ulva to Argyll lands, in the days of what may be called the "Clearances"

From 1940 the family would gather in the sitting room after supper to wait for the 9 o'clock news, relayed by an accumulator. The paraffin lamps were lit, and as they waited they fell to talking of Mull, Iona, Coll and Tiree. Although a majority, ---- the two grandparents, their oldest son and the crofting son-in-law all spoke Gaelic, they conversed in English in deference to my parents, and to me too, had they only known it, for, put to bed in my grandmother's room, up a narrow carpeted stair all on its own above the sitting-room, I would crawl out to sit on the stair. After some intriguing talk, my parents would leave

for the chalet at the top of the garden, sweeping me up from my pretended slumbers.... The chalet was the precious home of the crofting uncle and his bride, but they sacrificed it in the name of hospitality and Highland courtesy. They were like that Mull man Davie Balfour met in *Kidnapped*.

I was never asleep. I sat every night on that stair, unseen, drinking in every word, hearing about the Duke of Argyll and Mr Campbell the Factor in Sheepknowe, Paradoc, the MacAllisters, Annavalddy, Johnny ch'Alein, Mrs Bell Rhumore, Hugh Lamont Island House, Roddy Ardalanish, Miss Pettigrew Ardfenaig and all the rest of that *dramatis personae*.

One of the things that aroused my curiosity aged 8 was the number of ruined houses scattered everywhere.



(The family in Bunessan in front of ruined houses)

The two or three houses in the village itself were an eyesore. They were in disgraceful ruin. “Why have they fallen down?” I asked the crofting uncle. His reply was “Ask the Duke of Argyll!” I was too young to accept this any other way but literally, so made a mental note to approach this person.

About a year later, my aunt Lisbie asked me to take a message to Mrs Sheepknowe, the factor’s wife. The house was high on a hill overlooking the old mill. I knocked shyly and tentatively on the back door, and was invited in by Mrs Sheepknowe. She read the note, said she would write an immediate reply, and left me standing near a framed photograph which I studied carefully. It was a newspaper cutting with a caption. Three men were walking together at the Oban Gathering. One was a Campbell of Airds, and another the Duke himself.

He was dressed in a small tweed jacket, very tight, as if he had kept it since he was ten, and quite a short kilt, like a tutu. This was the man I’d been instructed to ask about the ruined houses. I gazed in fascination. Mrs Sheepknowe came over with her written answer, and seeing my rapt expression, she said, kindly and slowly, as if speaking to a four-year-

old, “That, you know, is His Grace, the Duke of Argyll.”

Needless to say, the opportunity to ask about the ruins never came. Many years later I was to learn the reason. The 10<sup>th</sup> Duke was a bit of a hermit. He had never wanted to be a Duke, but would have preferred to be a LIBRARIAN. His favourite spot was his library, his favourite occupation transcribing manuscripts, for which we are all grateful, as we have microfilms of his transcripts in all the older Scottish University libraries. The ruined houses must have slipped his mind.

My family thought of themselves as the intellectuals of the Community. Indeed, I began to think that they were, given my paltry experience of intellectuals. I think it meant having lots of books. My uncle Donie had a considerable library – Alexandre Dumas pere et fils, the pink volumes of the Left Book Club, HG Wells, Arthur Koestler, Upton Sinclair’s Lanny Budd novels, Sinclair Lewis, and many books in Gaelic. Great Uncle John, the schoolmaster, now retired, had a reputation for encouraging Gaelic in the playground. My grand-mother had a subscription to THE NEW STATES-MAN. George Macleod on his

way to the Iona Community, would stop by to borrow something to read.

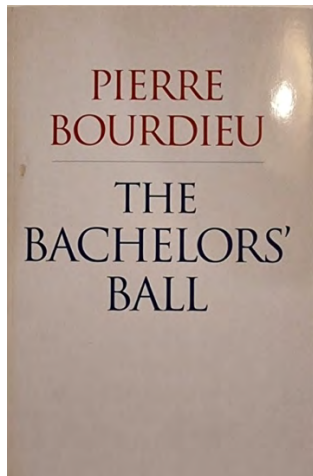
At the age of 9, on one of those two-month stays, I was considered old enough to deliver telegrams. It was still wartime, and people would get telegrams about their sons. On an old bicycle, I learned the map of the Ross. From Knockan to Scour to Ardtun and Ardalanish Uisken and Assapol. There would be cottages with earth floors -barely changed in 100 years. They had no electricity, no sanitation. There had been no change since the 'Clearances' as Professor Donaldson would say. But here I must interrupt to say that Professor Donaldson had a point.

In all my childhood eavesdropping I never heard anyone use the word Clearances, or speak of famine or eviction. Why this strange polarity? Funnily enough, as a mature woman, working in the University Library, I signed up for a conference in Strathclyde organised by Professor Tom Devine, on the Highland Clearances. A Mrs Morrison from Dervaig in Mull had been invited to speak as a guest, of her own family memories between the academic presentations. She said that her husband, a Mull man, had never heard the word starvation spoken in

all his born days, had never heard the word “Clearances” Good on you, Mrs Morrison, I thought. I found it delightfully rebellious, but she hadn’t meant it that way. It accorded with my own family history. The crofting uncle’s family may have left Ulva with consummate dignity. Was it the WORD which didn’t fit? I suppose it is primarily an academic word with its later scholarly implications. Did the people themselves speak in metaphors? Was eviction called emigration, and was emigration called finding and owning your own land?

There were many ceilidhs in those days. The crofting uncle was a very popular singer of Gaelic songs. At the end of the recital, *An t’Eilean Muileach* would be sung, and then the dancing would begin. If I may jump forward to modern French sociology, I’d like to comment on the similarity between Pierre Bourdieu’s image in his early work, *THE BACHELORS’ BALL*





of the shy young farmers of the Pyrenees, unable to marry until the father died, unless they were the oldest son, and the young farmers who stood watching the Mull dancing but never joining in. Like the crofting uncle himself, not marrying until his mother had died.

In the sitting room of the Post Office house, there were two large, framed reproductions of popular paintings which had a historical bent. One was *When did you last see your father?* by William Yeames

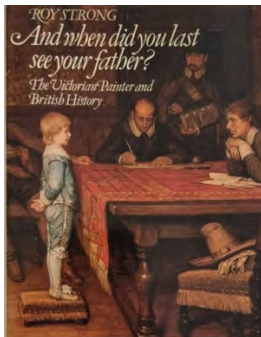


The other was Millais' *The Boyhood of Raleigh*.



These paintings were best sellers in their day. Both concerned English history. They are very haunting.

But this leads to another point, which Roy Strong



Flora McDonald's farewell to Bonnie Prince Charlie.

makes in his book, *And when did you last see your father?* subtitled *The Victorian Painter and British History*. This is the printed text of a series of lectures Roy Strong of the Victoria and Albert Museum gave at the Pierpoint Morgan Library in 1974. I shall quote part of the Foreword and would like to know later what you think.

## Q

Unashamedly, I have always loved these visions [ Victorian paintings of historical subjects ] Many, I suppose, will regard them as bad art, but when I was a child they gave me a kind of visual excitement about the past...

A glittering pageant. History as taught at the university, with its preoccupation with the administrative, economic and constitutional aspects, came as a terrible shock after this idyll of splendour

The other history painting has a Scottish subject, Flora MacDonald's farewell to Bonnie Prince Charlie, but it is really too Victorianly sentimental.

My uncle, Donie, was skilled at explaining the meaning of historical paintings, and the crofting uncle, also a Donald, skilled at explaining puzzling details about local people. Why was a man named Donie Cowan always called Dr Currie? He had been at a jumble sale said the crofting uncle, he had bought a black bag with a doctor's name inscribed on it - Dr Currie, so he was called Dr Currie ever after. About forty years later, helping on a family history website, I got a letter from Donie Cowan's great niece

asking the same question, and I answered it in a way Professor Donaldson wouldn't have trusted a yard.

Most of the people in the Ross of Mull in the 1940s spoke Gaelic.

JD or Johnnie Cameron, proprietor of the fleet of buses bringing visitors from Craignure to Oban, had the Mail Bus which unloaded about eight mailbags every day. He shouted angrily in Gaelic to half a dozen postmen as they dragged the bags into the sorting office

This was an exciting daily occurrence and everyone came out to watch, including, here, my three-year-old self. So we can date this photo to the summer of 1938, I think.



Right up until 1950 this supremacy of Gaelic seemed to remain... the year our family left for the mainland. You might remember the flight of Gaelic in the Ross by the death of the 10<sup>th</sup> duke in 1949, or by the advent of electricity or the demise of the old lady at Saorphein who was said to be a witch.

In the late 'Fifties, a Kintyre cousin of my mother's, a Mrs Rollo, rented Ardfenaig House for a month in the summer. We had a wonderful holiday - all the young cousins, boyfriends, girlfriends. The house was riddled with wet rot, but still rather grand. My old friend Johnny ch'Alein was still a postman, and recognised me. "Well," he said, "what a fine family you are, with your aunt Mrs Rollo Royce." He clearly thought we'd gone up in the world from the old days of postmasters, schoolmasters and shopkeepers.

Many years later, married, with three children and living in Edinburgh, it was too much to expect me to resist the call of Register House, for the grandmother's version of her husband's tree had survived. Investigating the many families, the card file came into being in shoe boxes. It grew and grew as everybody proved interesting. There was a constant movement between estates and between islands, especially Tiree and the Ross. But in many cases,

Tiree families had begun in Mull. The MacPhails in Iona had come from Torosay, the McEacherns of Tiree from Penalbanach in Mishnish, Lamonts from Kilpatrick, Torosay. The shoeboxes were at last so overflowing that a kind of davenport had to be built to house the cards.

After some years of living abroad, and returning to Edinburgh to take a degree in Theology and then to work in publishing, the most enjoyable job in the world came my way – in Manuscripts and Rare books in Edinburgh University Library. This was before a REAL Archivist was appointed to look after future conservation, and Special Collections had charge of the historical student ‘archives’ – such as they were. As nobody liked answering letters from ancestor hunters, this unpopular job was given to me, and the extra-ordinary thing was that within a few weeks 4 letters relating to Mull came in. A Mull doctor was compiling a study of former Mull doctors; a lady from NZ wanted to know if her great grandmother from Mull could possibly have been a student in the 1890s – were girls allowed? A lady in the US had heard that an ancestor had been blinded in a chemistry experiment – she didn’t know his name. This caused great hilarity in my colleagues – that

someone should have the nerve to ask about a student whose name she didn't know.

But they all happened to be in the davenport at home.

Even the nameless one was Charles Maclean, but the chemistry class was an invention. He had ophthalmia!

That the card file became a book was due to two sudden explosions of information. Nothing much had been written about Mull in book form. Nicholas Maclean Bristol's Hebridean Decade, the Argyll Estate instructions, Mairi's IONA, Alastair de Watteville's beautifully illustrated books on Mull, Staffa & Iona, Hannan's Beautiful Isle of Mull and a few articles.

Wikipedia didn't begin until 2001. People didn't have personal computers. Mull had been a great misty wilderness. Few of the dukes had bothered visiting it. The fifth duke had been the most involved. But before leaving dukes, let me go off at a tangent to a wonderful book about the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke, if you haven't already read it yourselves.



Published in 2013 – much too late for me. Of no value as far as Mull is concerned, Professor Roger Emerson's AN ENLIGHTENED DUKE- THE LIFE OF ARCHIBALD CAMPBELL 1682-1761, EARL OF ILAY, 3<sup>rd</sup> DUKE OF ARGYLL is a **delight. Note the modesty of the author's tiny name.** Professor Emerson begins by telling us that the Duke's papers have all vanished, and yet he is still going to write a biography. He's had to build up a portrait from sources apart, a way of working that I'm sure is familiar to most of you on a somewhat smaller scale. Mull is barely mentioned. Why do I love this book so much? Well it is colourful, it is illustrated, with ducal portraits, much of a muchness. I realise that this author, of whom I'd never heard, is an OBSESSIVE. I love obsessives in history. Professor Emerson brands the duke 'AN ENLIGHTENMENT MAN. The professor is an ENLIGHTENMENT specialist, so the biographer sets out to *speculate*, yes *SPECULATE* – something



no real historian would dare do. He speculates brilliantly in chapter 6, which is entitled *The Books of Archibald Campbell*. The author doesn't even sit in the library pulling out fine bindings. He approaches them through a catalogue. He has to estimate the total, for they are not all listed. It is a brilliant piece of logical, rational reconstruction encompassing bindings, booksellers, the art of cataloguing, the currency of ideas, and a study of the titles, from other sources, that the duke is known to have received as gifts. The end of the chapter asks "But did he read his books?" Again the author speculates, drawing on the developing interests indicated by each acquisition.

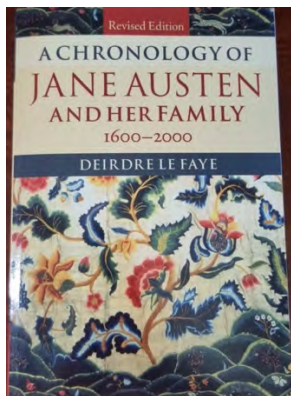
In chapter 9 the biographer is concerned with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke's religious beliefs. As a friend of David Hume he might well be suspect. You must forgive me for thinking that this serious book is full of fun. That is how I read it. But I mustn't get carried away by admiration for this study, for had it been published earlier it could have added nothing to my perception of the dukes, who, in my family's vision were rolled into one - the Overlord. Only the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke could have earned their unalloyed respect for his plans for his estate, and these plans were to be scuppered by his own son and heir. These tenants were

philosophical about the chances of a black sheep turning up in any family. Like most families they had a few miscreants tucked away in their own history. The response ASK THE DUKE OF ARGYLL, so ironic and incomprehensible to a questioning child, was a meaningful and tolerant instruction which was carried out in a way they would not live to see. If they had guessed that I would have the effrontery to write a book about Mull, they would have laughed like anything.

The two explosions I referred to earlier were, first, a preliminary examination of the Lochbuy Papers in the Historical Search Room of the National Archives. Held on deposit from the Maclaines of Lochbuie in the early 1920s, when the family was leaving Mull, it is an incredible collection, not confined to the Lochbuies, but assembled from other Mull family collections. I would give anything for somebody like Professor Emerson to work out the time and reason for each addition. I suspect that it was collected mainly by the Murdoch Maclaine, who built the present house, and had a custom-built room for legal papers, as well as personal letters, encouraging other families to place documents there for safe keeping. Many of these first deposits must have been forgotten by their owners, as is obvious from the many appeals

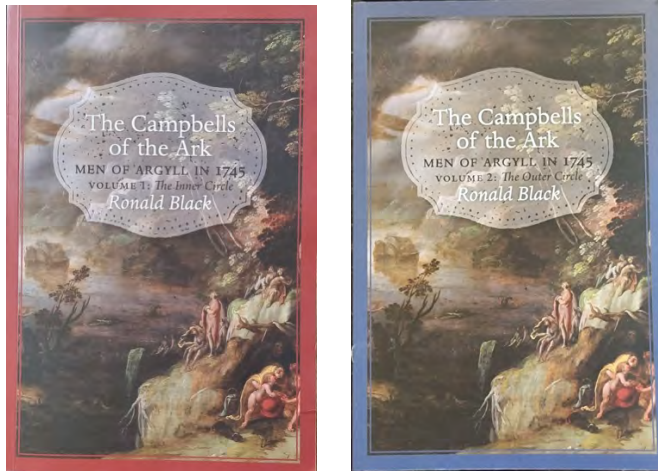
to lawyers in Edinburgh which might have been handled by a birleyman with access to the archives.

Happy the man or woman who can begin a project early in life. A brief example -



Deirdre Le Faye 779 pages

Another work with the same kind of fascination is the two-volume *The Campbells of the Ark: men of Argyll in 1745* written by a certain Ronald Black and based on his translation of Alexander MacDonal's long poem *The Ark*. Ronald has no idea that I'm going to mention him, so I won't say any more, except that I read in volume I that Professor Emerson sent him a pre-publication copy of the biography. Ronnie might not like to be considered an 'obsessive', but it is a vast compliment. I wish this work had been available when I was writing about Mull.



The second explosion in information came in about 1996. Each Manuscript department in all the University Libraries in the country receives a copy of a list of New Accessions in all the other libraries and Record Offices.

It was a dull-looking confection, and nobody had time to read it. I would glance through it in the forlorn hope that the word MULL would jump off the page. This time it did. The Gloucestershire Record Office announced the arrival of the Thornbury Estate Papers along with the Maclaine of Scallastle Papers from the Isle of Mull. There was no description of the contents. Deposits in libraries are placed in trust, are not required to be listed except in the most superficial way, and are there at the discretion of the legal owner. It was quite a time before I was able to go to Gloucester. In fact, between the enormous holdings in the SRO (as it then was)

and the GRO, I knew I was going to have to give up my own job early. I only got to Gloucester about 3 months after my carefully and regretfully organised retirement, and retirement meant a shortage of funds for staying in faraway places.

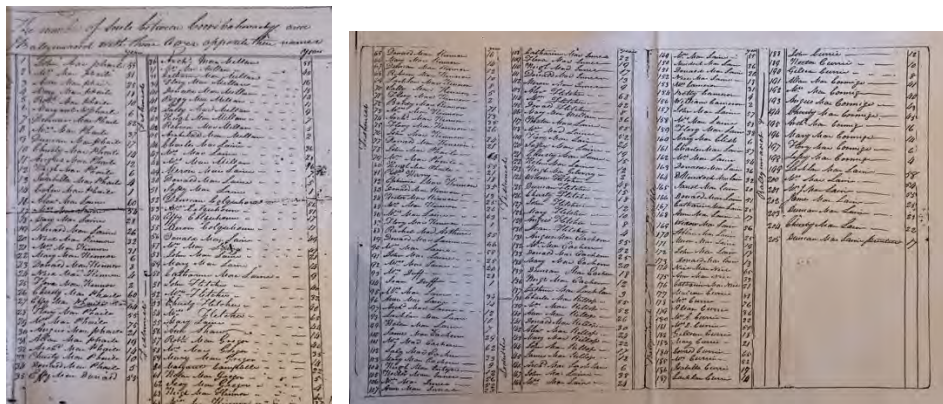
At least the papers weren't in America.

Never have I felt more in need of a kindred spirit than when looking through the Gloucester deposit. You need somebody who understands the significance. First I speculated about how the letters, diaries and papers had come here. They had been largely Gillean Maclaine's property. His widow had been unable to read, let alone understand their importance. Perhaps she had kept them in a 'press' at Scallastle and Ledirkle until she left Mull. Perhaps her stepson, Lauchlan persuaded her to leave the collection with him, her own sons being abroad. It would take a Professor Emerson to work out their complicated journey.

But this is the important thing: many of the letters in the Scallastle Papers are from Murdoch Lochbuy and form the polite replies to the recriminations of the Scallastle letters. Hitherto, Murdoch has been a

recipient of letters. He seems to have been the confidant of everyone in 'the country'. But we haven't seen until now his own writing style. He is certainly not a stylist. His spelling, in the framework of his time, is not good. But he is infinitely kind and compassionate, particularly faced with the hatred of Allan MacLaine of Scallastle and his spiteful mother, daughter of Lachlan MacQuarrie of Ulva. The SRO and GRO letters form a rounded picture of the feud. How often does this happen in the history of Manuscripts? How easy it would have been for someone to destroy one side.

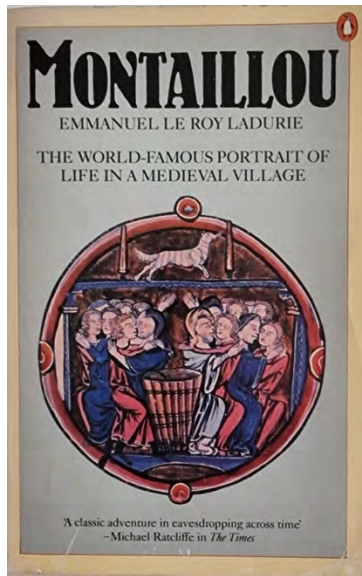
You may say that petty feuds have no place in the bigger picture. But in agreeing with you, I have to tell you that among the papers that went to Gloucester before or after Lauchlan's death, were his wonderful diary of life in Mull over 20 years, including a daily report on the weather,



and his census, recording every person in a sample area of Eastern Mull in 1829, 12 years before the first official census. Then there were his comments on inter-family relations. As Professor Emerson might have deduced, the collection went to Gloucestershire after 1847, to Hector Maclaine now in Kington with his English wife. I doubt if Hector even glanced at the collection. But he gave it house-room. It remained in the hands of family relations there for a century and a half. Not having the Lochbuy Papers to hand to explain the contents, the manuscripts would have been relatively meaningless.

You might think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. Is this 'Microhistory?' Do we have Micro-history in Scotland? Is *Morvern Transformed* micro-history? This is where I shall be asking you questions at questiontime. You, the real historians.

I'm afraid I've given my heart to French history. I daresay this is mistaken, but it seems more exciting. Not only in its actual events, but in its explanations of itself. The ANNALES School of history in France has had 3 or 4 generations of existence, starting with Lefebvre, moving on to MONTAILLOU by



Emmanuel Le Roi Ladurie, and now goodness knows where it is. Do we have an equivalent? Do we teach Historiography in history departments? Does it simply mean the emphasis put on a historical quest? I ask you this question in all ignorance and refer you to Questiontime

I suppose we must have a Scottish Historiography if we have a Historiographer Royal in Scotland, but I've never heard it mentioned.

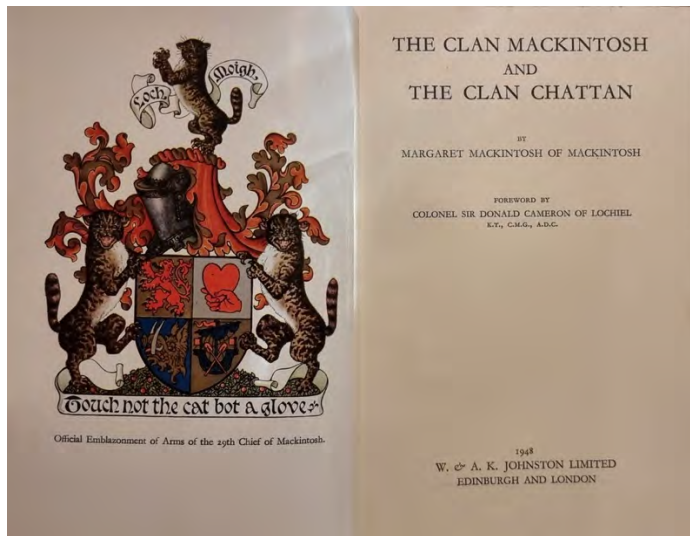


I have to remind you that all that started off as family history, and the fact that it became a book was simply due to the astonishing, irresistible detail that emerged, when I found no satisfying book to answer all my own questions, and to confirm my grandmother's insights. I think everyone who writes a book should have an audience in mind. My readership was to be the Mull diaspora.

Unlike my maternal side who were all around, talking of dukes and lands and interesting remote ancestors, who sang old songs, whose Gaelic poems were in print ----- my father's progenitors were unknown to me as a child. My paternal grandfather was Irish and died before I was born. I knew my grandmother was a Mackintosh because that was the tartan we were entitled to wear. We'd had a dagger on the dining room wall which, my father claimed, had been at the Battle of Bannockburn. Later it was shown to have been found at Culloden. They didn't have a clue about history. The Mackintosh grandmother died when I was four- no chance to ask her any questions.

My father died when we were in Canada, having passed on a few stories about the family cat. He could have mentioned apropos, the Mackintosh coat of Arms with its

*Touch not the cat bot a glove,*



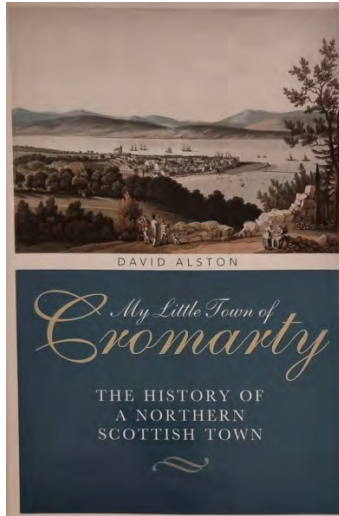
**which I'd have loved, but he didn't. He was a lovely man, a tennis player, a pianist, but without the vital spark of genealogical curiosity.**

**My parents were now both dead and gone. Like the parents of so many people who take up family history late in life.**

**I returned to Register House. It took a year to gather up births, marriages, deaths, censuses, information from the dear old established**

reference books, the FASTI, the Statistical ACCOUNT, and ANNALS OF THE DISRUPTION. It was time to visit the places. We went to Shetland, Cromarty, Munlochy, Kilcoy, Rosemarkie, Daviot and Inverness. But in the end I reduced the field of enquiry to two lines Thomas Mackintosh, near Daviot, Tacksman or Factor to Aeneas Mackintosh of Mackintosh, Chief from 1770-1820. The other, across the Moray Firth was Alexander Munro, Tacksman to Mackenzie of Kilcoy. Thomas Mackintosh had a son named Obed, like the son of Ruth and Boaz. Alexander Munro a daughter Martha, like the Martha of the Gospels. In 1808 Obed married Martha. Surely Obed, with such a name, could never slip through the net?

I had no intention or desire to write a book, but the pull of those two families sustained me for several years. Books for reference were assembled. Alexander Munro's wife's family came from Cromarty. The Cromarty historian, Dr David Alston, had written *My Little Town of Cromarty*, and *Ross and Cromarty: a historical guide*. Hugh Miller had written *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, Eric Richards and Monica Clough weren't far away with *Cromartie: Highland life 1650-1914*.



It seemed that every minister north of Inverness was a Mackenzie, and when I bid for a manuscript copy of a list of landowners dated 1742, in a Saleroom in Edinburgh, looking for Suddie,

*Valuation Book*

*The Town of Cromarty*

Valued by a Commission of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in the year 1742.

Value of the Town of Cromarty for the Burgh	1460
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	1350
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	1487
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	253
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	272
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	50
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	18510
Total	20689 6

*Nonconform*

Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	240
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	272
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	50
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	274
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	30
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	30
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	50
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	33
Value of the Burgh of Cromarty for the Burgh	34
Total	1037 3

*Suddie*

Balmorally	£162	"	"
The Laird of Culter	510	5	0
Mackenzie of Muirton	213	6	10
Mackenzie of Suddie	278	10	"
Alexander Matheson of Benagefield	181	10	"
Total	1343	12	6

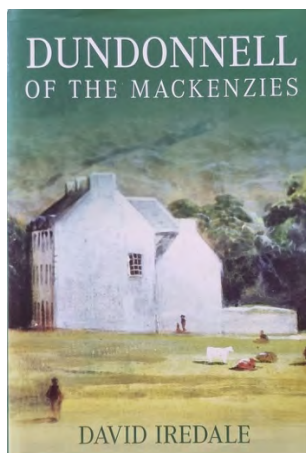
*Kilmuir Wester*

Colin Graham for his Lands of Dyrnie	£236	1	8
George Graham Younger of Dyrnie in his Due for Wester Hags	33	6	8
Mackenzie of Pillindy for Pillindy	50	"	"
Allanrange	500	"	"
Pat. Spark Carried over	7659	0	4

it was only to find that nearly every proprietor was a Mackenzie. Every person of substance was a

**Mackenzie. There was no getting away from the Mackenzies.**

**And one day, in 2009, happening to be in Fort William with my brother and his wife and a cousin and her husband, we all sauntered into WH Smith.**



**On a table was a most beautiful hardback book entitled *Dundonnell of the Mackenzies*, by David Iredale, published by a publisher I had never heard of – Phillimore, a division of The History Press, specialists in local and family history. It was the quality of this book that struck me first. I looked inside. Endpapers showing old maps, impeccable indexes groaning with Mackenzies, and an entry for Donald Ross, Martha’s brother-in-law, the minister of the parliamentary church at Lochbroom, one of ours. The book was priced at**

**£30. I lusted after it, didn't dare buy it in the presence of my relations, or I'd be labelled a reckless spendthrift, and I had to devise a subterfuge whereby we could all leave the bookshop and I would hurry back to claim it.**

**Dundonnell! The history of one house, so surely a microhistory, turned out to be a *mise en scene* for the whole area north of the Great Glen, and therefore a macro-history, of the most thrilling dimensions. Not quite on the scale of Niall Ferguson's *The Ascent of Money*, published in the same year, but macro enough for us.**

**"Mackenzies dominated Ross from coast to coast by the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century" writes the author in chapter 12. At page 64 he still hasn't reached Dundonnell, the house itself, which is introduced on page 71**

**On page 70, the cover picture of the house, Dundonnell, is shown to be two houses stuck together, the front one grander, but still joined to the earlier one of 1703. This I knew well, from having rented Ardfenaig in Mull, in the 1950s, where the Tacksman's house had been expanded in exactly this way. Do you know of other**

**enlargements like this? Another of my questions to you later.**



**My guess is that the owner of Dundonnell, Tim Rice, the lyric writer of EVITA and JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR, commissioned David Iredale to write this history, or his wife Jane did. Tim Rice has been a hero of mine for a long time as a lyricist, but he (or Lady Rice) is a hero ten times over for publishing this invaluable book.**



**Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber**



Fort George from the air

**However, it doesn't mention Obed Mackintosh, so the next time I am in the Inverness area I go to Fort George, because in one of his son's records he is described as an Army Officer. Luckily there is someone in the library at Fort George, who tells me that a person called 'O. Mackintosh' is in the Army List as an ensign in the West Middlesex Regiment in 1807. Why an English Regiment? Perhaps through the influence of Aeneas Mackintosh of Mackintosh? A question still to be answered.**

**I search books about the Peninsular Wars, but nothing appears. In 1812 he is back in the Black Isle, or Martha is, for she gives birth to a son, Alexander Mackintosh in Suddie, near Munloch, where members of my family are buried. Which indeed is mentioned in a Munro Will as 'home of our ancestors'. Obed has taken up farming at Flowerburn, in the Parish of Rosemarkie, on Mackenzie land.**



**Fast forward to the Parish Records of 1831 for Rosemarkie. Alexander has been accused of making a girl from Avoch pregnant. He is “Mr” Alexander Mackintosh, and attempts to pay the girl to keep quiet. Obed and Martha turn up in Glasgow records. I have hundreds of facts and records that fit only slightly. In the 1840s Obed is superintendant of a home for the homeless in Glasgow. It is all a mess. I am tired of not resolving things. Suddenly, in 1864, Mr Alexander Mackintosh turns up in Greenock, marrying my grandmother’s mother, Jane Johnson, a Shetlander. They are both widowed.**

**Between all these events, which I don’t expect you to follow or even find interesting, there are vivid glimpses of Munro testaments, of the poignant deaths of promising talented children, and most disturbing of all, the possibility that one of the Munros is the William Munro identified by Dr David Alston, the Cromarty historian as a slave owner in Berbice or Demerara. But no, the dates are wrong, and our William Munro dies in Tain, a prosperous doctor. But there were relations of theirs who had some involvement in the Caribbean and Demerara. I simply didn’t want to pursue that.**

**David Alston directed me to a description of two eccentric Munro daughters living in Inverness. It was delightful, but my heart wasn't engaged. I find blatant errors in the DNA companies I try, who pass on erroneous relationships constructed by baffled customers. How do I know? From the Mull connections sent in by enthusiastic searchers, who mistake people in the censuses -or the Mormon transcriptions they followed were faulty... Mull is the litmus test for the reliability of the enterprise.**

**Can you scent a feeling of failure in my quest for what I call Munloch? Do you recognise that old undergraduate feeling before exams? The end is in sight, for my conclusion is that one needs twenty-five years to work on a family tree. Americans (often the earliest of the waves of emigrants from Scotland) need more time still. One needs familiarity with the land. And one must have a sprinkling of living older members of the family. So sorry to defy you, Professor Donaldson !**

**The Munloch side - and that includes Cromarty, Lochbroom, Tain, Daviot, Kilcoy, Dingwall, Avoch,**

**Shetland, Inverness, Glasgow and Greenock is full of colourful vignettes, full of marginal relations, of comfortable well-born people, and many poor people on their uppers, people with monetary expectations, until the Will is changed.... of clashes between the 19-year-old son up before the presbytery and Obed his highly proper father.**

**While those loose ends could be woven together, they also point to something historiographical, helping me to accept the kind of 'historian' a librarian is likely to be. For I think those engagements with Mull and Munloch are in their way microhistories, and what they have in common is an interest in ancestors. But in the small details of houses and places, a much larger pattern can be discerned – a social history of Scotland, even expanding outwards to global contexts and scales. They may be linked as micro-histories, but are importantly different. To see the world in a grain of sand may be a function of both, but that world is altered and deepened by the presence of a story-telling grandmother.**

**End**