

The Clan System

The Clan system was the effective means of government in the Highlands of Scotland from sometime before the year 1000 AD until it was essentially eliminated by the British in 1745. It grew out of the similar system of Celtic Ireland, from whence the Scots came.

What is a Clan? A leading anthropologist defines a clan as a group whose membership stipulates, common descent from a single ancestor. A Clan might, therefore, be said to be a bunch of cousins, but Sir Iain Moncreiffe has described the Scottish clans much more appealingly.

Although people often speak of 'old Families', in fact no family is older than any other. What is meant is that the particular families called 'old' have managed to maintain their identity and retain records of their past longer than the majority of other folk. In England and abroad, this is too often true only of a limited aristocracy. In the Highlands, however, everybody was eventually descended one way or another from several of the great historic royal clans.

Sir Iain's description should be particularly satisfying to all Highlanders because of what he describes as the sacred royal and dynastic origin of the founder chiefs, and thus of the clans themselves: the ultimate biological unity with the Sovereign that accounts for 'Highland pride' and 'loyalty; In the end-papers of this book, Sir Iain sets out two conjectural family trees: The Galley, showing clan descent from the Norse King Ingiald, 7th century ruler of Uppsala, and The Lyon, showing clan descent from the Irish Eochu, King of Tara, father of Niall of the Nine Hostages. The Lamonts are members of the Lyon group.

But now that the clans have dispersed to near and far corners of the world, what is left beyond a vague remembrance of Scots descent? What remains is the clan: a sense of family, of common roots, of a place from whence we all came, strengthened by the romance of history, the skirling of pipes, the swing of the kilt, the remembrance of a dour and hard, but beautiful land, and above all, Highland pride and loyalty.

What is a Chief? The principal division is between chiefs and chieftains. A chief is properly described as Chief of the Name and Arms. He is head of the whole name in Scotland. The description; Chief of the Clan is sometimes used although this is more properly a social description rather than a legal designation. The chief of the name and arms is entitled to wear three eagle's feathers in his bonnet badge. A Chieftain is the head of a considerable branch of the name and was frequently called Chieftane of the Cuntrie. A chief will have one or more chieftains under his command although in the organization and leadership of their branch they will have considerable independence. The chief's eldest son or heir presumptive is also considered to be a chieftain and in the major clans, all the chiefs' sons may be considered to be chieftains. A chieftain of a clan is entitled to wear two eagle's feathers in his bonnet badge.

Having said that the head of a whole name is described as Chief; the law does recognize that there are different levels of chiefship to reflect the relative importance of the different names or clans in Scotland.

Heraldic rights - Chiefs entitled to Supporters. The grant of supporters to a chief was indicative of the fact that he was of sufficient standing with a large following, to warrant the grant of this exclusive heraldic right. Certain chiefs from the peerage and baronial class were entitled to supporters as a right and include chiefs such as The Duke of Argyll, the Earl of Rothes, Colquhoun of Luss or Burnett of Leys. Certain other chiefs, had become sufficiently important in their own right to warrant the grant of supporters to them at some stage. Such clans include the Lamonts, MacGregors, the Eliotts and the **Macneils**.

Although the titles Chief and Chieftain are used loosely, it is important to distinguish the different gradations from the precise language which is used in the Lyon Court Matriculations issued to confirm their position as Chief, Branch Chief or Chieftain in their respective clans and families.

But what of the chief? Of what use, if any, is he or she when warfare has little use for claymore or targe, or even kilt or pipes? Of what use a chief when the economy of the clan no longer depends upon a communal agriculture close to the land of a single glen or island or district? Of what use is a chief when boasting of great exploits or mighty position is more likely to bring the crimson of embarrassment than the cheers of exhilaration and triumph?

In spite of all these changes, the chief of a clan still is usually the center of leadership in whatever the clan does. What has changed is less the role of the chief than it is what the clan does. Where once it was the very essence of existence, the clan now is a valued adjunct to the more fundamental problems of earning a living in a money economy, and of being a good citizen in a modern community, a community caring little for ethnic attachments to past glories and ties. (Even in Scotland is this in a sense true.) The modern chief's role can be seen then in terms of these clan activities and interests-- supplemental to our everyday lives, but vital to the clan. Finally, a chief still serves as symbol, representative and leader of his great extended family.