

## Clans, regiments and a force for good

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE primary function of “clans” was military. Their social cohesion turned them into a fighting force with which the British Army conquered a big part of the world. The Clearances were therefore a monumental folly. The merging of the last distinctive units into a Royal Regiment of Scotland in 2006 marked the dying breath of the “clan system” as defined above. But the clan spirit still exists, and the time has come for it to be channelled, at the same global level, into the arts of peace, through its relevance to the conditions of the developing world.

That, I think, is the message of a new book of biblical proportions by the island historian Nicholas Maclean-Bristol, “From Clan to Regiment” (Pen and Sword Books Ltd, £45, [www.pen-and-sword.co.uk](http://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk)).

I’ve known Maclean-Bristol for thirty years. He was educated at Wellington and Sandhurst and spent twenty years as a KOSB officer in all the usual places – Malaya, Aden, Northern Ireland. On his mother’s side he’s related to the Macleans of Coll. He was constantly told as a child that he looked and behaved like a Maclean. “I’m not sure this was meant as a compliment,” he says. “I wanted to be a Bristol like my father.”

Many of us can point to books read in childhood which provided a puff of wind to propel us through our lives. One of mine was Otta Swire’s “Skye: The Island and its Legends”. Nicholas’s were Gregory’s “History of the Western Highlands and Isles” and Sinclair’s “Clan Gillean”, both of which I would have found impossibly dry, because what I liked best was stories (the more improbable the better). Clearly Nicholas was a historian and genealogist in the making.

Once when in Aden he saw a motorcade going down the street and recognised the visiting dignitary as the grandson of the emperor of Ethiopia, Prince Alexander Desta, whom he had known at school. He phoned him at the Governor’s house and they ended up spending ten days exploring Ethiopia together. Desta asked if he would consider leaving the army to help him develop his country. It was the “moment of conversion” that changed Nicholas’s life for ever. He said: “No, my future is in the Hebrides, but I’ll send you able young Englishmen and it will be up to you to capture their imagination.”

First he bought Breacachadh Castle in the isle of Coll, which had been a ruin since 1750. He restored it in the same way that had been done to Eilean Donnain, Kishmul and Duart – not as a tourist attraction, for few tourists come to Coll anyway, but as a place to live and work. From there he ran the Project Trust, the original “gap year” organisation, which had begun as an army initiative and was now in the voluntary sector, sending out dozens of youngsters every year to gain experience of work in developing countries. After a couple of decades he handed the reins to his wife Lavinia and concentrated on being a historian of the Clan Maclean.

“From Clan to Regiment” is his third major book and by far the biggest. When you compare my first paragraph with what I’ve said about Nicholas, you can see there’s a certain parallelism. Everything that Maclean-Bristol believes in most passionately is now between 750 large pages of small type. It’s an attractive and important book and a great deal will be measured against it in the future. But it has arguably fallen victim to an over-indulgent publisher, and there are lessons in it for aspiring imitators.

First the hugeness. While reading it I grew convinced that publishing it like this was only one of various options. It’s essentially a history of the Macleans of Coll from 1400 to 2000. Their world changed radically about 1800, halfway through the book. When I got to Nicholas’s own story at the end I felt I was in at the birth of a separate autobiography. Two books – or even three? I also found myself reading the second half quickly by skipping the many letters. If they had been briefly summarised instead of quoted at length, the book could have been a lot smaller. Far be it from me to tell authors or publishers what to do – I just want to feel assured they’ve considered all the alternatives.

My hope is that people will read this book, because it’s important. My fear is that they won’t, because it’s big.

Then there’s the name. The dust-jacket and spine call it “From Clan to Regiment: Six Hundred Years in the Hebrides 1400–2000”. The title-page, which is bibliographically the

only thing that matters, has it simply as “From Clan to Regiment”. Even if we include the sub-title, none of this tells us what the 750 pages actually consist of – a detailed history of the Macleans of Coll, with occasional excursions to America, Spain, India, Africa or wherever Macleans of Coll were in action at any given time. The subject is nicely encapsulated in a phrase at page 533, “the extended family of Coll”.

Since there’s a good market for books about islands, it’s extraordinary that the publishers have missed the chance to trumpet that this is a history of Coll every bit as complete and satisfying as Norma MacLeod’s of Raasay or John Lorne Campbell’s of Canna. I suppose one reason why it’s not presented as such is that the Coll estate consisted of four parts – the isle of Coll minus its two ends; a long sliver of land in north Mull called Quinish; the isle of Muck; and the isle of Rum. Maclean-Bristol deals with all these impartially, so we learn for example of two villages created by Alexander Maclean of Coll at the same time, Dervaig in Quinish and Arinagour in Coll. A more helpful and eye-catching title might have been “The Macleans of Coll: A History of Coll, Quinish, Muck and Rum”.

These things matter. A couple of years ago in “The Scotsman” I reviewed the book with which “From Clan to Regiment” will inevitably be compared, Jo Currie’s excellent “Mull: The Island and its People”. I basically said I didn’t like it, because it wasn’t about Mull the island, nor was it about its people either, except for those who were educated enough to write chatty letters to each other between 1700 and 1900. I was bitterly disappointed, and it’s only after readjusting myself mentally to what “Mull: The Island and its People” is actually about that I’ve come to appreciate it as a superbly crafted piece of writing, tightly edited, beautifully presented and choc-a-bloc with human-interest stories.

“From Clan to Regiment” is important because it delves deep into documentary sources to provide the most detailed history we have of the managerial classes of an island community. It makes a complete set with Eric Cregeen’s work on Tiree, Jo Currie’s on Mull and Mairi MacArthur’s on Iona. It puts the Mull islands away ahead – there’s nothing like this for the groups based on Skye, Lewis, Uist or Islay.

It’s also important because it offers a thesis which must be tested in future studies. The thesis may not seem earth-shattering, but I for one agree with it. Every so often I detect the thumping sound of a new position being staked out in opposition to other historians’ ideas.

The stakes wind like a trail through the book. The hereditary soldiers in Coll were the Macleans of Crossapol and the MacFadyens. They were the *luchd-taighe* (“household”) of whom we learn in traditional verse. Appointments made in the late eighteenth century show clearly that “the descendants of Coll’s bodyguard in 1679 and 1716 still dominated the military establishment on Coll and that the military ethos of the clan lived on”. The Crossapol family in particular loom large from one end of the story to the other. Their military role explains why. “Yet historians such as Allan Macinnes believe that military tradition in the Hebrides has been exaggerated!”

The stakes lead on. Another historian, Andrew Mackillop, “does not believe, as I do, that a laird’s people followed their chief out of loyalty and habit”. Maclean-Bristol then quotes the earl of Selkirk as holding a position halfway between his own and Mackillop’s. “The zeal with which the followers of any chieftain came forward to enlist,” wrote Selkirk, “was prompted not only by affection and the enthusiasm of clanship, but likewise by obvious views of private interest.”

The path enters modern times. In pay lists submitted to the War Office in 1798 the men are given in alphabetical order by first name, showing that that’s how the company commander identified them. Between 1800 and 1815 the descendants of men who had been officers or *luchd-taighe* were officers in the British Army. As for the privates, “the fact that so many men in the army came from the criminal classes helps explain why recruits from the Highlands & Islands were so prized” – which leads to an interesting discussion of the problem of administering floggings to common soldiers who considered themselves “gentlemen under arms”.

It’s a trail that will go on, I hope, into the future. Once Gordon Brown has withdrawn our troops from Iraq, why don’t he and Alec Salmond get together and discuss (say) how the spirit of the Project Trust, the bitter experience of Scotland’s marginal communities, and the once-high reputation of our universities can be harnessed into a positive force for good called the Black Watch? Something like the Peace Corps or Médecins sans Frontières?

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