

THE LAST SCOTTISH CHIEF OF CLAN MACNACHTAN

The last Scottish Chief of Clan Macnachtan, John McNaughton, was born (presumably at Dunderave) about the time his father joined Bonnie Dundee at Killiecrankie to support the restoration of James II against William and Mary, an action that cost the Laird his lands. When John was twelve, his only brother, Alexander, was killed while serving with the English navy in the Spanish War of Succession. When he was sixteen, John succeeded his father as Chief of the Clan. He got a Master of Arts at Glasgow University in the year of Union between England and Scotland. At age 21 he was forced to make a formal disposition of Dunderave and other Macnachtan properties.



Figure 1. Charles II of England in Coronation robes, painted by John Michael Wright (Royal Collection).

John left Argyll forever and joined the customs service at Anstruther on the eastern coast where he founded an influential gentleman's club and became an elder in the Church of Scotland. His life was rocked by two Jacobite Rebellions, when he was 25 and 55. Eventually he was made Inspector General of Outports in Edinburgh. He died aged 83, was lauded in the Edinburgh papers and laid to rest in a burial ground of St. Cuthbert's Church. There is no grave marker or memorial to this brave, creative, generous man, a much admired natural leader.

Quite a few documents about John survive and some fine historians and writers have examined them. In particular we are indebted to Angus Macnaghten, a member of the Irish Chieftains' family, who was a diligent scholar and prolific author. In 1951, Angus produced the first comprehensive family genealogy [1]. In 1977 Duncan McNaughton published a brief history of the Clan [2]. Angus followed this in 1979 with more details about John McNaughton [3]. Then, in 2001, David Stevenson, emeritus professor in the Department of Scottish History at the University of St. Andrews, wrote extensively about the Beggar's Benison [4], the club with which John was involved. These four books supply the timeline for our last Scottish Chieftain.

On 12 February 1267, King Alexander III of Scotland gave a charter to Gillechrist MacNachdan and his heirs for the island and castle of Fraoch Eilean in Argyll. The original charter still exists and can be viewed at the National Archives of Scotland (NAS) in Edinburgh (No. RH6/55), but Alexander's seal is missing.



The Macnachtan Clan owned lands in Perthshire and Argyllshire and their fortunes waxed and waned with religious, political, financial and legal battles. John McNaughton was the last Chief to leave the family stronghold of Dunderave. When he was 64 John made a copy of the 1267 charter and annotated in Latin "John M'Naughtan, Customs Officer at Anstruther, descended in an unbroken male line from the aforesaid Gillecris had this copy printed A.D. 1753." This facsimile, with engravings of both sides of Alexander's seal, is also at the NAS (GD112/16/7/2/34). John died without issue in 1773 and left his meager estate to a niece. In 1818 the Lord Lyon transferred the Chieftainship to a family of Macnaghtens in Northern Ireland and the title has been passed down in that family ever since.

Figure 2. James II of England, by Sir Godfrey Kneller.

In 1668, John's grandfather, Sir Alexander McNaughton, borrowed money from Sir Andrew MacDougall and, like so many people today, used as equity his property, which happened to be the Clan Macnachtan lands. By 1668 there was a Decree of Apprising to enter heir to Sir Alexander's lands by the Duke of Argyll, head of the Campbell Clan. Alexander had a son who was called John or Iain; to avoid confusion in this story, we will call him Iain. On 6 December 1683, Iain married Isobel, daughter of Sir John Campbell of Glenorchy and in 1685, succeeded his father as Chief of the Clan. In the same year he served as Sheriff Depute of Argyll and Commissioner for Supply for Inveraray. In 1685 and 1686 he was a Member of Parliament for Inveraray.

1689 UPRISING

Cromwell's Commonwealth ended with the Restoration of Charles II, re-establishment of the Church of England and imposition of Episcopalian church government (Fig. 1). In 1685 Charles II was succeeded by his Roman Catholic brother, James II (and VII of Scotland), who tried to impose religious tolerance of Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters, antagonizing members of the Anglican establishment (Fig. 2). In 1688 James's second wife had a boy, bringing the prospect of a Catholic dynasty, and seven notable Englishmen invited James's daughter Mary and her husband and first cousin, William of Orange, to depose James and jointly rule in his place (Figs. 3 and 4). On 4th November 1688 William arrived at Torbay, England and, when he landed the next day, James fled to France. In February 1689 the 'Glorious Revolution' formally changed England's monarch, but many Catholics, Episcopalian and Tory royalists still supported James as the constitutionally legitimate monarch. Scotland was slow to accept William, who summoned a Convention of the Estates that met on 14 March 1689 in Edinburgh and considered a conciliatory letter from William and a haughty one from James. The convention set out its terms and William and Mary were proclaimed at Edinburgh on 11 April 1689, then had their coronation in London in May.



Figure 3. William III of England (studio of Sir Godfrey Kneller).



Figure 4. Mary II of England.

On 16 April 1689 John Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee, raised James's standard on the hilltop of Dundee Law (Fig. 5). Dundee—known today as 'Bonnie Dundee,' after a song written by Sir Walter Scott in 1830—received support in the western Scottish Highlands from Roman Catholic and Episcopalian clans. By July the Jacobites had eight battalions and two companies, almost all Highlanders. Iain McNaughton and his uncle were with their clan at the gathering of loyal chiefs at Lochaber in May. A Highland Charge defeated a larger lowland Scots force at the Battle of Killiecrankie on 27 July 1689, but about a third of the Highlanders were killed in the fighting, including Dundee. In the same month Iain McNaughton's (and the Laird's) lands were forfeited in the Act of the Estates. On 24 August Iain, along with other Chiefs, signed a Bond of Association, pledging fifty men for a future campaign of Major General Mackay, the Williamite Commander. On 14 July 1690, the Scottish Parliament passed a decree of forfeiture against the leaders of the Uprising, including Iain and his uncle, but this was not carried out. On 17 August 1691 William offered all Highland clans a pardon for their part in the Uprising, provided that they took an oath of allegiance before 1 January 1692 in front of a magistrate. The Highland chiefs sent word to James, now in exile in France, asking for his permission to take this oath. James dithered over his decision, eventually authorizing the chiefs to take the oath in a message that only reached its recipients in mid-December. Despite difficult winter conditions a few, including Iain, took the oath in time. The exemplary brutality of the Massacre of Glencoe sped acceptance, and by the spring of 1692 the Jacobite chiefs had all sworn allegiance to King William.

In 1695 the Macnachten lands were sold to Archibald Campbell and Iain would have had to move out of Dunderave. On 11 May 1700, he was staying with Campbell of Ardkinglas when he wrote a letter to a Ronald Campbell. On 23 January 1701 Iain was served for his lands in the Abbey of Holyroodhouse, whence he had fled to avoid imprisonment. He was prohibited from disposing of his property and litigation dragged on. In 1704, a bond and decree of lands of Dunderaw, etc., was acquired by Sir James Campbell the younger of Ardkinglas from Sir Andrew McDougall, granted by the Duke of Argyll. Perhaps this brought some relief; the same year the Laird of McNaughton again became Commissioner of Supply for Argyllshire.

THE LAST GENERATION

Iain and Isobel had three children in this tumultuous time—Alexander, John and Christian. The eldest boy, Alexander, was killed while serving and enriching their new English masters in the Vigo Expedition. In August 1702, at the outset of the War of the Spanish Succession, Sir George Rooke and the Duke of Ormond led an abortive expedition against Cadiz. On the way back they received news that a large Spanish treasure fleet and its escort were harbored in Vigo Bay. On 12 October they annihilated the enemy, sinking 11 men-of-war and taking 10 war vessels and 11 galleons (Fig. 6). Though most of the treasure had been landed, the gains were enormous.



John McNaughton was born in 1689 [4] or 1690 [1]. We will assume it was 1690 to make subtraction easier; readers who prefer 1689 can add a year to his age, which is interpolated here to give perspective to the story. In 1706, when John was only 16, he succeeded his father as Chief of the Clan. At the time he was a third year student at Glasgow University. Angus Macnaghten believes he studied Greek, Logic, Rhetoric, Ethics, Physics, Mathematics and Astronomy and became a Master of Arts in 1707, which was the year of Union for England and Scotland [3].

Figure 5. John Graham, Viscount Dundee (collection of Earl of Strathmore).

In 1709, when he was 19, John appealed to his uncle, the Campbell Earl of Breadalbane, for employment. The next year at age 20, he was forced to make a formal disposition of the lands of Dunderaw and other properties to Sir James Campbell. On 1 March 1711, at age 21, John appeared before the Kirk Sessions of Inveraray and testified that he had married Isobel, daughter of James Campbell, a merchant in Inveraray. On the 11th he was cited for fornication with Isobel before marriage. On the 18th, John and Isobel, described as married, were rebuked by the Kirk Sessions. This did not seem to hurt his standing in the community as in the same year he was made a burghess of Inveraray and served on a jury. The actual transfer of the Macnaghtan lands did not take place until 1713; by this time John, aged 23, had left Inveraray forever.

In 1714 John became a boatman in the customs service at Montrose, on the east coast between Dundee and Aberdeen. This was not much of a job for a former Highland Chief, but presumably his options were limited. On 28 September 1715 he was living in Skinner's Close, off High Street in Edinburgh, when his sister Christian wrote from her mother's family home in Finlarig to warn John of the another Jacobite Uprising. John's wife Isobel was still in Inveraray.

1715 REBELLION

In the summer of 1715, James Francis Edward Stuart (The Old Pretender), son of James II, called on the Earl of Mar to raise the clans (Fig. 7). The Highlanders resisted marching into England and there were some mutinies and defections, but they pressed on. Instead of the expected welcome, the Jacobites were met by hostile militia armed with pitchforks and very few recruits. They were unopposed in Lancaster and found about 1,500 recruits as they reached Preston on 9 November, bringing their force to around 4,000. Then Hanoverian forces arrived to besiege them at the Battle of Preston, and the surviving Jacobites surrendered on 14 November.



Figure 6. The Battle of Sheriffmuir, painted in 1702 by Ludolf Bakhuizen.

In Scotland, at the Battle of Sheriffmuir on November 13th, the Earl of Mar's forces were unable to defeat a smaller force led by the Duke of Argyll and Mar retreated to Perth while the government army built up. Belatedly, on 22 December 1715 a ship from France brought the Old Pretender to Peterhead, but he was too consumed by melancholy and fits of fever to inspire his followers. He briefly set up court at Scone, Perthshire, visited his troops in Perth and ordered the burning of villages to hinder the advance of the Duke of Argyll through deep snow. The Highlanders were

cheered by the prospect of battle, but James's councilors decided to abandon the enterprise and ordered a retreat to the coast, giving the pretext of finding a stronger position. James boarded a ship at Montrose and fled to France on 4 February 1716, leaving a message advising his Highland followers to shift for themselves.

The records about John between 1716 and 1725 are a little confused. On 25 October 1717, it appears he was dismissed from customs. Duncan [1] thinks he was reinstated at Anstruther in 1718. On 12 March 1720, Isabell Campbell, spouse to John McNachtane, confessed to adultery before the Kirk Sessions of Inveraray—where she was servant to a merchant—and had to sit on the stool of repentance. In 1721 John, aged 31, married a second wife, Jean McArthur. The same year he subscribed to Allan Ramsey's Poems, which sought to revive patriotic anti-Union Scots bawdy. In 1725 he was appointed tide waiter in the Customs Service at Anstruther, Fife, north of Edinburgh, a thriving port with a strong fishing industry and a vigorous trade with various countries of Europe. Because of newly adopted British customs duties, there was also a booming smuggling business.



Figure 7. James Francis Edward Stuart, claimant to the thrones of England and Scotland.

On 4 April 1728 John was promoted to Collector, in charge of the port of Anstruther customs precinct. As such, he would have been a big fish in a small pond, being a former Highland Chief, well educated, and in a position to control the flow of goods in and out of this strategic port, both legal and illegal. No doubt he was well acquainted with all the important figures in the vicinity and was able to make deals. David Stevenson believes that, four years later, in 1732, a gentlemen's club was started in Anstruther called the Beggar's Benison. In 1737, John was a witness at an Episcopal christening and as we shall see, later became an elder.

On 14 September 1739, John, aged 49, compiled a Code of Institutes of the Beggar's Benison, which was signed by 32 members, all men. The Benison was shocking, daring, rebellious, and sophomoric. It involved initiation rituals of masturbation, dirty jokes and poems and may have been a cover for smuggling and covert anti-Union sentiment. Gentlemen's clubs are probably as old as the oldest profession, but what is surprising is that these records and some paraphernalia have been preserved. There was no intercourse and there were rules about how gentlemen should conduct themselves, but on occasion there were female nude models, which must have added to the excitement. The Benison met twice a year and most of the members were married; no doubt these meetings must have been eagerly anticipated in such a small town where entertainments would have been few.

On Christmas Eve 1740, a W. Douglas addressed a poem to John, who, as well as being a man of influence in the area, was now a central figure in a newly created 'secret' society. Angus [3] did not think the poem worth repeating, except for five lines:

And who so fit to patronise her the Muse's verse

As thee, McNachtane, in whose gen'rous breast

Reigns each humane and social virtue?

Who, in a selfish and deceitful age,

Shows Truth and Friendship have not left the World?

John became Sovereign of the Beggar's Benison in 1745 and remained so until his death in 1773, almost 30 years. The club itself lasted almost a century and was replicated in Edinburgh, Glasgow, England and St. Petersburg in Russia. The earliest surviving diploma, which is signed by John as Sovereign, is dated December 1745, the same year as the Rebellion.

1745 REBELLION

Charles Edward Stuart—also known as Bonnie Prince Charlie and The Young Pretender (Fig. 8)—had been in exile in Rome with his father, James Francis Edward Stuart, The Old Pretender. Charles raised funds to outfit two ships that landed him with seven companions at Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides in late July 1745. He had hoped for support from a French fleet but this was badly damaged by storms and he was left to raise an army in Scotland.

The Jacobite cause was still supported by many Highland clans, both Catholic and Protestant, and the Catholic Charles hoped for a warm welcome from these clans to start an insurgency by Jacobites throughout Britain, but there was no immediate response. Charles raised his father's standard at Glenfinnan and marched on Edinburgh, which quickly surrendered. On 21 September 1745 he defeated the only government army in Scotland at the Battle of Prestonpans and by November was marching south at the head of around 6,000 men. Having taken Carlisle, Charles's army progressed as far as Derbyshire. Here, despite the objections of the Prince, the decision was taken by his council to return to Scotland, largely because of the almost complete lack of the support from English Jacobites that Charles had promised. By now he was pursued by King George II's son, the Duke of Cumberland, who caught up with him at the Battle of Culloden on 16 April 1746.



Figure 8. Prince Charles Edward Stuart.

Ignoring the advice of his best commander, Lord George Murray, Charles chose to fight on flat, open, marshy ground where his forces would be exposed to superior British firepower. Charles commanded his army from a position behind his lines, where he could not see what was happening. Hoping that Cumberland's army would attack first, he had his men stand exposed to Hanoverian artillery for twenty minutes before finally ordering an attack. The Jacobite attack, charging into the teeth of murderous musket fire and grapeshot fired from cannons, was uncoordinated and met little success. Charles, believing himself betrayed, decided to abandon the Jacobite cause. Bonnie Prince Charlie's subsequent flight has become the stuff of legend, and is commemorated in the popular folk song "The Skye Boat Song." Assisted by loyal supporters such as Flora MacDonald—who helped him escape pursuers by taking him in a small boat disguised as her Irish maid—he evaded capture and left the country, arriving back in France in September. The cause of the Stuarts being lost, the remainder of his life was, with a brief exception, spent in exile.

THE FINAL YEARS

In an extraordinary turnabout, John McNaughton—the last Scottish Chief of Clan Macnachtan, Stuart sympathizer and 56-year-old Sovereign of the Beggar's Benison—on 2 June 1746, only six weeks after the Duke of Cumberland had finally destroyed the Stuart cause at Culloden, invited the Duke to join the Beggar's Benison. The invitation survives, although no response by the Duke is recorded. It was the same year that an exclusive English club established by Sir Francis Dashwood started meeting regularly (Fig. 9). They used several names, including the Brotherhood of St. Francis of Wycombe, the Order of Knights of West Wycombe, the Monks of Medmenham and, like the London club founded in 1719, the Hellfire Club.

Figure 9. Portrait of Sir Francis Dashwood by William Hogarth.

Dashwood's club was far more outrageous than the Benison. Female "guests" (a euphemism for prostitutes) were referred to as "Nuns" and parodies of the Mass were held in contempt of religion. The original twelve members included Thomas Potter, son of John Potter, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Benjamin Franklin is said to have occasionally attended meetings as a non-member during his time in England. Many members have been linked to Freemasonry. Philip, Duke of Wharton, who founded the London Hellfire Club, after disbanding it became the Grandmaster Freemason of England. In 1751, Dashwood leased Medmenham Abbey and made expensive changes, including extending the caves underneath. These are now known as the West Wycombe Caves or the Hellfire Caves and tours are held regularly. I visited in the mid-sixties and was told that the club held rituals in the steeple while regular church services were conducted below.



On 24 June 1761, at the age of 71, John left Anstruther to become joint Inspector General of Outports in Edinburgh and remained there until he retired from the service on 23 October 1765 at the age of 75. He was granted a house for life at Springfield, two miles north of Edinburgh. John continued to be active in the church, serving as representative elder for Anstruther Easter at the annual general assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1765, 1768 and 1770. In 1769 he was elected to sit for the presbytery of St. Andrews. He died at the Customs Officers' Residence at Springfield on 5 April 1773, aged 83.

OBITUARY

On 14 April 1773 there was an obituary in the Edinburgh Courant:

Monday night, died at his home at Springfield, near Edinburgh, in the 85th year of his age, John Macnachtane of Macnachtane, Esq., late collector of the customs at Anstruther. He was the last male descendant in a direct line of the ancient family of the Macnachtanes, chiefs or chieftains of that once numerous and powerful family. A series of misfortunes or perhaps rather too liberal an exercise of uncommon generosity, the distinguishing characteristic of his family, deprived him and his immediate ancestor of the possession of a large and ancient inheritance.

Hence it was that the representative of an antient family, the chieftain of a powerful name was obliged in his youth to belittle himself to the service of the customs and accept of an office which, in other days he would have thought too insignificant for the meanest cadet of his family. But though Mr. MacNachtane did not enjoy the opulence of his ancestors, he still retained that nobleness of spirit, that generosity of disposition which were at once the honour and ruin of his family. Though his memory is not marked with that attention to self interest, that cautious prudence and economy which attract the admiration of little minds, nor with that ability which the avaricious and undiscerning ascribe to the acquisition of riches, yet there are to be found in his character singular excellencies, not unworthy of the esteem and study and imitation of mankind.

Possessed of all the advantages of birth, he wanted that arrogant claim to superiority and haughtiness of disposition, which, in most men, render the quality of birth disgusting; and he was above that meanness and conceit which in others render it contemptible. With the benefit of a genteel education he united the greatest simplicity of manners, the greatest politeness with the greatest sincerity. He enjoyed that greatness of mind which could be liberal, beneficent and charitable, without even the appearance of ostentation; and when he could not command money to answer all the purposes of generosity und humanity, his body apparel, his household furniture, were readily and repeatedly applied in that way. He made it the study of his life to protect the innocent, to procure justice to the injured.

To the dignity of a Sovereign he added the humility of a peasant; but his humility was not the effect of study or affectation. It proceeded from the warmest attachment to, and from the justest sense of the natural rights of mankind. Nor was his dignity the result of any superiority of birth or station which he arrogated to himself; for in him dignity was the natural production of the most exalted sentiment of mind. In his religious exercises, even to his last, in his advanced age, he was possessed of that soundness of judgment which renders religion venerable, and of that cheerfulness of disposition which is the genuine offspring of true piety, and is equally an enemy of the gloom of superstition, and the wild-fire of enthusiasm.

In fine, in whatever light you behold his character, it always commands your respect, and attracts your regard. View him even in his frailties, he exhibits a picture of the most amiable simplicity, worthy rather of imitation than of censure; but view him in his excellencies, he is admirably great. A singular phenomenon distinguished his character; though he was never in debt, though his income was always scanty, in public entertainments he equalled the most wealthy, in private charities he always excelled them. With the paltry salary of an office of the customs, most men could barely preserve the thread of existence; but MacNachtane could do much more. With such a salary and under such circumstances, he could find means to assist a friend, to relieve the distressed; and what is still more astonishing, he could add a lustre to chieftainship, and support the dignity of an antient and honourable family. He lived universally beloved; he died universally regretted.

RESTING PLACE



Duncan's book [2] was published in 1977. He and I corresponded several times—in 1965, 1977 and 1978. On 12 September 1978 he sent me this addendum: “John McNaughton, the last Chief, was buried in the Chapel of Ease, Chapel St., Edinburgh, a now disused graveyard. Most of the stones were removed when a church hall was built there in the 19th century. This had been removed & the ground laid out in grass, but no indication of burials remain. His old friend Menzies of Culdares was buried beside him (Culdares Papers).” Two years later Angus wrote [3]: “John was buried in the burial ground of the Chapel of Ease, which was once an extension of St. Cuthbert's Church. Today the Chapel, near the University, in George Square, is a furniture store, and the small graveyard is walled off.”

Figure 10. St. Cuthbert's Chapel of Ease, now called Buccleuch Parish Church (photo by Derek Christie).

The first mention of a Chapel of Ease at St. Cuthbert's is in 1754, when a proposal

to build one on the south side of the parish was made and approved because the church accommodation was inadequate. A piece of ground at the Windmill or west end of the Crosscauseway was bought and the Chapel of Ease was opened in 1756; the cemetery was opened in 1763 and closed when filled in 1819. In 1834 the church became the “quoad sacra” parish of Buccleugh. It is now part of Kirk O’Field (Fig. 10). Other Chapels of Ease were opened later, but none before 1823.

A recent reference [5] says: “Buccleuch Parish Church and Burial Ground. Around 1755, the burial grounds of St Cuthbert’s Parish Church ... had become so overcrowded that the Kirk session decided to open a new burial ground to the south of the city. This church and a small churchyard were built in 1755-1756 at the junction of Chapel Street with Buccleuch Street in the Southside. The church was earlier known as St Cuthbert’s Chapel of Ease from which Chapel Street probably took its name. This new site was outside the city walls and originally contained a large windmill which used to raise water from the Borough Loch at the Meadows. There is now no trace left of the windmill but we still have the name of nearby “Windmill Street” to remind us of it’s earlier existence. The building is no longer a consecrated church and the burial ground is in the care of the City of Edinburgh Council.

“In the early 1900s the church Kirk-session decided a hall was needed and, finding that it was legal to build over the graves in the cemetery, they erected a large building to the north of the church and occupying most of the burial ground except for the strip round the boundary walls. The monuments present on the site were carefully removed and the more important ones placed against the north wall of the church. At the turn of the 20th century a roller skating craze swept through Britain, and Edinburgh, not to be left out, followed the trend. The church hall was subsequently hired out as a roller skating rink but this soon resulted in a public outcry about people skating over the graves of the dead and accusations of sacrilege. As a result of this outcry and the appearance of several letters of protest in the local newspaper, the contract with the skating company was quickly terminated.” A Website [6] says “The church is now used as a store by the University of Edinburgh. Access to the graveyard may be gained during normal office hours.” In May 2008 John Williamson, premises manager for the University of Edinburgh, which uses the premises for storing furniture, informed me that Edinburgh City is responsible for the graveyard. Mortonhall Crematorium on Howdenhall Road told me that the gate is not locked.

As Potterrow runs south from the city it becomes Chapel Street just east of the university, which is surrounded by George Square. Windmill Lane enters from the west and Windmill Place and Windmill Close exit east. Buccleuch Parish Church is on the west side of Chapel Street opposite West Crosscauseway. Chapel Street then becomes Buccleuch Street.

John McNaughton, the last Scottish Chief of Clan Macnachtan, has been getting no more rest in death than he did in life. Perhaps one day he will get a fitting memorial.

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CREDITS

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