
Covering a period of one hundred and fifty years, Jean MaDougall’s *Highland Postbag* gives a fascinating insight into the family lives of four MacDougall chiefs during a time of major change in the Highland way of life. Using the surviving correspondence of the chiefs and their immediate families, MacDougall presents a patchwork of family life, giving an insight into domestic arrangements and social conditions of the time. Beginning with the Jacobite rising of 1715, for which Iain Ciar, 22nd Chief of the MacDougalls was exiled, the correspondence is followed through to 1865, with the death of his great, great grandson, John, who led a similarly courageous and adventurous life, as an officer in the Hanoverian Navy.

That the loyalty of the MacDougall chiefs switched from that of the Stuarts to the Hanoverians over four generations has been subject to speculation but is partly explained by letters to and from Alexander, the 23rd Chief. In the year 1745 he had only just been returned the ancestral lands, confiscated from his father as a consequence of his exploits in the Jacobite Rising. That they were returned was in no small part down to the efforts of friends in London, one of whom wrote to him telling of the joy he had felt at ‘your good behavior both as to your self and Restraining your men Concurring in the late ffoolish Wicked project.’ Although remaining loyal to the government, it is evident from future correspondence that Alexander was shocked by the aftermath of the Rebellion and was willing to help those who were suffering from it.

While the letters are in part devoted to the warrior exploits of the chiefs, they also reveal more genteel characteristics. Indeed one of the striking features of the correspondence, particularly...
with regard to Iain Ciar, is the tenderness and sensitivity shown to his wife, Mary, during his time fighting with the Jacobites and subsequent exile. In one letter he writes, ‘had I all France to myself, I had rather have bread and water with my dearest.’ In another letter dated 21st January 1721, he writes ‘none has a greater concern for your late and daylie sufferings.’ At this time Mary was pregnant and the letter is primarily concerned with the acquisition of a maternity gown and christening clothes which he was to send to his wife. Amongst his description of the different garments, Iain Ciar informs his wife of a momentous piece of news for the Jacobites, that of the birth of Charles Edward Stuart. This is typical of how incidents of national importance were mixed with everyday domestic affairs.

With the exception of the Jacobite Rebellions however, there is little mention of the major changes taking place in the Highlands at the time. Although reference is made to Alexander’s efforts to improve the land and some concern is expressed for the victims of the potato famine which engulfed the Highlands in 1846, it is family issues which dominate. Infant mortality and medical matters, money problems, marriage, ethics and religion are all themes which run through the 150 years of correspondence. One of the most important and consistent aspects of life during the time of the letters was the large number of children born to most families. At the MacDougall home of Dunollie, forty-five children were born to the four chiefs, the number of which would have been considerably higher had it not been for miscarriages. The health and well-being of these children was an endless source of concern for their parents, which is perhaps not surprising considering the high rate of mortality among them. The issue of marriage is one which receives considerable attention, the financial implications of which were paramount to the chief’s interest. In particular, all through the period the heir to the family was expected to marry money in order to keep the ancestral estate together. In one letter to Patrick, who would become the 24th chief, his brother Duncan advises him on finding a wife: ‘if your Belly was less than it is, which it will never be till you eat and drink less than you do, you would not find the matter so difficult.’

Amusing at times and emotional at others, these letters get to the very heart of the MacDougall chiefs family life. Although in many respects they speak for themselves, Jean MacDougall’s
selection, arrangement and commentary ensure this collection has a wide appeal. With a useful introductory chapter which explores some of the characteristics of letter writing throughout the period and a concluding chapter which draws together some of the recurring themes of the correspondence, this is a book which should be of value to both researchers of Highland history as well as those with only a passing interest.

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