THE SAVAGE AS PEACEMAKER:
THE HIGHLAND HOST OF 1678

The savages under consideration are Scottish Highlanders, and the peacekeeping operation is the quartering of the “highland Host” in the western Lowlands, in 1678. It is a remote world from our own, but some comparisons with present-day situations, in various countries, will suggest themselves. The activities of the Highland Host were luridly described by contemporaries. “[The government] brought down from the Wild Highlands a host of Savages upon the Western Shires, more terrible than Turks or Tartars, men who feared not God nor regarded man”¹—and many others write in a similar vein. The Host continues to be remembered, if mainly by the descendants of the people of the west, as a major atrocity and grievance. There is a reference to it in the Stepsure Letters, published in Nova Scotia in the 1820s, where the Highlanders are portrayed as ogres who shoot on sight.² The main book on the subject, published in 1914, refers to “the body of licensed marauders handed down to execration in the West as ‘The highland host’”.³ Yet this army of about 8,000 stayed two months in the Lowlands without, apparently, killing anyone—whereas, in the next decade, many hundreds of the West Country people were shot or hanged for preaching Presbyterian sermons, or even for attending them. The obvious question about the Host is, then: why such intense resentment?

It was understood at the time that the Highland Host was sent in by the government to prevent the people from rebelling—in a broad sense, to secure peace. Beyond that, it was not at all clear what was going to happen. The Host might merely demand food and shelter for a few weeks, so that the penalty imposed on the Lowlanders for making rebellious gestures would be some inconvenience and the equivalent of a fine. Or the Host might burn and kill till the country was destroyed and, therefore, peaceful, as the Romans had once been accused of doing in
Scotland ("Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.") This idea of peace did not die with the Romans and seventeenth-century Scots were well aware of it. When the Macdonalds were trying to exterminate the Campbells of Argyle, in the 1640s, they boasted that they had not left a house standing or a cock crowing within twenty miles of Inverary. When the Highlanders marched south in 1678, it was not at all clear what kind of peacekeeping mission they were engaged in.

Stationing Highlanders in the Lowlands was in itself a drastic action in seventeenth-century Scotland. Explaining why this was so requires a brief survey of Highland-Lowland relations over several centuries. The Highlanders spoke Gaelic, and their culture was considerably different from the English-speaking Lowland Scots. The Gaels had been gradually and sporadically driven out of the Lowlands, the most fertile part of Scotland, between the fifth and eleventh centuries. Even in the latter period they remained the dominant group in Scotland as a whole. The last powerful Gaelic king was Macbeth, who ruled from about 1040 to 1057, with a power base in the north-east. Shakespeare's otherwise historically inaccurate play does record correctly that Macbeth was overthrown by Malcolm with an English army. (It is also correct in noting that Malcolm's younger brother, Donalbain, escaped from Macbeth. Donalbain re-emerges briefly in history after Malcolm's death as the last Gaelic king of Scotland). In the 1130s a rising in the north-east by Macbeth's great-grandson was defeated by the anglophile King David I, and soon after this the line between Gaelic and English speakers, the cultural Highland Line, became established approximately where it was to stay until the nineteenth century. It generally follows the geological line—where the high hills begin—though the situation becomes more complicated in the north-east.

The two cultures lived separately, without very much interaction, even of a hostile nature. Full-scale Highland armies were liable to appear in the north-east Lowlands in the fourteenth century, but the last of these was the incursion of the Lord of the Isles, defeated at Harlaw in 1411. The only exception was the area of Moray, which remained vulnerable: as Cameron of Lochiel said in 1645, that was where "all men taks their prey"—
he meant, of course, all neighbouring Highlanders. Elsewhere, only Lowlanders within about fifteen miles of the Highland Line would have to worry about losing cattle, or daughters. The Scottish government naturally remained concerned about the Highlanders, who composed close to half the population until the seventeenth century; but the view of the ordinary Lowlander became, as one might expect, that the Highlanders were alien savages who spoke an incomprehensible language, and could generally be ignored.

The language was given different names. Early on it was often called Scots, to distinguish it from the variation of English spoken in the Lowlands. For example, this comment in about 1380: “The race of Scottish speech inhabits the highlands and outlying islands. [They are] a savage and untamed nation, rude and independent, given to rapine...and exceedingly cruel.” Later, “Scottish speech” came to mean the Scots dialect of English, spoken in the Lowlands, and the Highlanders and their language were often called Irish. This was more logical than it may seem, as the Highlanders spoke essentially the same language as the Irish, and had similar customs. The last King of Scotland who could speak Gaelic, and had some sympathy with Highlanders, was James IV (killed at Flodden in 1513), but he was something of an anachronism and his successors regarded the Highlanders as barbarians, who should be forced to abandon Gaelic for English, and Lowland ways. King James VI, who described the mainland Highlanders as “barbarous for the most part” and the islanders as utterly barbarous, “without any sort or shew of civilitie,” did have some success in getting at least the main chieftains to learn English. His son, Charles I, wanted to set up English schools in the Highlands, “for the better civilizing and removing of the Irish language and barbaritie out of the highlands,” and then welcomed the even better idea of sending large numbers to Nova Scotia.

The government had two main techniques for imposing its will on the Highlands. The first was political, or legal. Highland clans were fairly homogenous organizations, and it seemed reasonable to make each chieftain responsible for his clan. He would be required to sign a “bond”, basically to the effect that his clansmen would behave as the government wished them to, and
if they did not the chieftain would be held responsible. But this
system, which was established by the late sixteenth century, did
not work very smoothly. The chiefs might refuse to sign the bond
or, more often, they would sign and then ignore it, carrying on
as before. The government’s options were then rather limited.
Taking a Lowland army into the Highlands was very risky, so the
usual way to take reprisals against an obnoxious clan was to
intervene in one of their local feuds—and this was the second
technique for subduing the Highlands. It involved giving gov-
ernment backing to one side by issuing them with “letters of Fire
and Sword”. This meant that they were officially authorized to
attack and, as far as possible destroy, the clan that the govern-
ment regarded as especially dangerous. Here are the instruc-
tions for proceeding against clan Chattan (which included
Mackintoshes and Mackinlays) in 1528. “invaid thame to thair
uther destruictioun, be slauchtir, byrning, drowning and uther
waysis...to leif na creatur levand of that clann, except preistis,
wemen and bairns”—who were to be shipped overseas.9

Clan Chattan fought back, of course. The government was
naturally best pleased when the side it backed won, and de-
stroyed a large part of the other clan. But even if the other side
won, or the war was inconclusive, it was an advantage to have
neighbouring clans attacking each other rather than raiding
further afield. The Scottish government would regard a feud
between, say, the Appin Stewarts and the Macdonalds of Glen-
coe, in much the same way as the modern American government
regarded the war between Iran and Iraq: there might be unfort-
unate consequences, but in the meantime it was a fairly good
thing that these peoples were killing off each other and not
attacking more civilized groups. In the late seventeenth century,
the “Fire and Sword” system began to change in that the
government became more directly involved. In 1688 it backed
the Mackintoshes against the Macdonalds of Keppoch, and also
sent some government troops to help them. (Unsuccessfully—
the Macdonalds got help from the Camerons and won the main
battle.)10 In 1692, at Glencoe, it was in theory official govern-
ment troops who carried fire and sword to the Macdonalds—
even though the troops consisted largely of Campbells and their
traditional allies, from the Early of Argyle’s regiment.11
Such activities took place within the Highlands, and had no discernable effect on the South. In the long period between the battle of Harlaw (1411) and the 1640s, most Lowlanders felt able to ignore Highlanders, or see them merely as objects of curiosity. One view is expressed in a sixteenth-century poem about how the first Highlander was made. (Partly translated).

God turned o’er the horse turd with his pointed staff  
And up starts a Highlandman black as any draff.  
Said God to the Highlandman, “Where will you now?”  
“I will down in the Lowlands, Lord, and there steal a cow.”

God, who is in company with Saint Peter and the newly created Highlander, then loses his sheath knife.

“Now,” said God, “here a marvel! How can this be  
That I should want my gully and we here but three!”  
“Humff!” said the Highlandman and turned him about  
And at his plaid nook the gully fell out.12

The main point, that the Highlanders lived by thieving, preferably from the Lowlands, was clear enough. Lord Macaulay cites this poem as an example of the utter contempt with which Highlanders were regarded.13 He may miss something of the tone, which is rather good natured, and implies admiration for the courage, ingenuity, and sheer gall of the Highlander. (Macaulay’s grandparents were from the outer isles, the part of Scotland King James VI characterized as being utterly barbarous, so he may have been over sensitive on this point.) The poem seems rather to reflect a period when the bulk of the Lowland population would only occasionally come in contact with Highlanders, and they could be seen as comparatively harmless petty thieves. With the exception of Moray, it had been over 200 years since a sizeable Highland army had appeared south-east of the line.

However, Lowland attitudes to the Highlanders—both the government’s and the ordinary person’s—changed significantly soon after Alasdair MacColla Macdonald sailed from Ireland, in 1643, with a small army of Macdonalds who had been exiled from Scotland, and other Irish troops. Kintyre, and much of the south-west Highlands, had been taken from the Macdonalds by the Campbells (over about a century) and Alasdair MacColla’s
aim was to get them back. Once in Scotland, he retired more Highlanders from anti-Campbell clans, and set about his task—by killing off Campbells. But the Civil War was still going on, and MacColla decided to join the Marquis of Montrose and fight for King Charles I. The main reason was that the Campbell chief, and therefore his clan, supported Parliament in the war. If MacColla fought for the King, and the King won, there was a good chance that he would be rewarded with the Macdonald’s ancestral lands. A secondary reason was that there were good opportunities for plunder in the Lowlands.

Thus, on 1st September 1644, the Lowlanders faced a Highland army for the first time in over 200 years. It was actually made up of native Highlanders, Highlanders whose families had been forced out to Ireland a generation before, and Irish—but the Lowlanders understandably were not interested in these distinctions. The Lowlanders were on home ground, near Perth, outnumbered their opponents by about two to one, and seem to have been confident of victory; but they were quickly swept away by the “Highland charge”. Within a year, the Highlanders had won five more battles in the same way. This was the first alarming point about Highland armies—they were very hard to defeat. The Highland charge remained effective for at least a century; as in 1746, the British army general, Hawley, who had written a treatise explaining how to deal with a Highland charge, was quickly defeated by one at Falkirk.

The second point was that the Highlanders gave no quarter, and devastated much of the country they passed through. No doubt there is much sheer prejudice in the accounts of Highland brutality, but Alasdair MacColla’s men do seem to have distinguished themselves in this respect; at least after their second battle, outside Aberdeen, when they went on to sack the city for four days. The main first-hand account of this comes from the records of John Spalding, a native of the city who managed to survive. His account is especially valuable because he supported the King, and was therefore unlikely to exaggerate atrocities committed by a Royalist army. However, he gives some alarming examples of the Highlanders’ behaviour. “The cruel Irish [meaning Highlanders] seeing a man well clad, would first seize him and save the clothes unspoiled, then kill the man.” The
Highlanders killed a lot of men and, according to Spalding, many women who bewailed their husbands’ deaths.¹⁴ MacColla’s men certainly instilled a great fear of the Highlanders, which was still there a generation later at the time of the Highland Host. (The fear was, however, probably counter-productive: few Lowlanders would join the army of MacColla to fight for the King.) The third factor in Lowland views of the Highlanders was allied to contempt: the Highlanders were a savage people who should not have any power over the more civilized. This comes out, for example, in the commentaries of Robert Baillie, a moderate church leader of the time, from the area where the Host was later settled. He wrote of the Highlanders’ victories in 1645: “This is the greatest hurt our poore land gott these fourscore years and the greatest disgrace befell us these thousand. If we get not the life of these worms shirted out before they creep out of our land, the reproach will stick on us for ever.”¹⁵

This brings us to the situation in south-west Scotland in 1677. Prior to his Restoration, Charles II had promised to continue the Presbyterian church system in Scotland, but instead he reintroduced Episcopalianism. His government was consequently unpopular over much of Scotland, and certainly in the western Lowlands. The Presbyterian system was comparatively democratic; the people had a say in choosing who their minister was to be, and the ministers had a vote in church policy. Once appointed, a minister became an important leader of the community and also a government functionary. Under the Episcopal system, bishops made the main decisions, and they were appointed by, and responsible to, the government. Perhaps for political reasons as much as for theological ones, the Scots were very attached to Presbyterianism, and when it was abolished many refused to go to the official church and instead held illegal, presbyterian services, often outdoors. These became known as conventicles.

The government believed that these conventicles were breeding grounds for rebellion, and there had indeed been a Presbyterian rising in 1666 ending in the battle of Pentland. The government therefore introduced increasingly severe penalties for attending conventicles, through the 1670s. It brought in the death penalty for preaching at such a meeting, and then for
merely attending one—but these penalties could not be enforced. The government therefore conceived the idea of treating Lowland landowners like Highland chieftains, and making them sign a “bond” for their tenants’ good behaviour. In this case, good behaviour consisted primarily of going to church and no going to conventicles. The Landlords would be held responsible for anything the tenants did and, if they could not produce an offending tenant to be fined or executed, they were liable to be fined or executed themselves. This Bond, introduced in 1677, was understandably unpopular with the landowners, and most of them refused to sign.

The government’s next step was perhaps connected with its second method of dealing with Highlanders; the threat of fire and sword was at least present in the background. It decided to quarter a large Highland army in the most defiant area of the country, south of Glasgow, until the Landowners had signed the bond. (There were also troops stationed in Ireland at this time which, although not used, were poised to assist in Scotland.) The basic means of pressure was that the Landowners, and their tenants, would be fined until they conformed with the law. The army was made up of about 6,000 Highlanders from the eastern Highlands plus about 2,000 Lowland troops. The leaders were not regular Gaelic-thinking chieftains, but members of the higher nobility who doubled as overlords of parts of the highlands—the Marquis of Atholl and the Earls of Moray, Perth, Caithness, Strathmore, Airlie, and Mar. Two of these titles are geographically confusing. The Earl of Moray drew men from his lands in Menteith, on the south edge of the Highlands, and the Earl of Caithness was at this time John Campbell of Breadalbane. The troops were actually taken from the south-eastern edge of the Highlands, the part most accessible to the Lowlands: Menteith, Strathearn (Earl of Perth), Breadalbane, Atholl, Mar. The Earls of Strathmore and Airlie led contingents from Angus, which fits this pattern, but was culturally part of the Lowlands.

The army assembled at Stirling in late January 1678, and from there moved on to Glasgow. They stayed in the Strathclyde area for about two months, with separate units moving about from place to place. After that they went back to Stirling and dispersed. They occupied houses and consumed food and drink;
and sometimes also fired barns and killed or seized livestock. But
the destruction does not seem to have been on a very large scale,
and the Host did not kill anyone—or at least no specific case is
recorded. Indeed, the only person confirmed killed was a
Highlander, by local countrymen.\textsuperscript{16} The Host did persuade the
majority of Landowners to sign the Bond, though not all. The
most important exception was the Duke of Hamilton, the main
landowner in the area and one of the three or four chief
noblemen in the kingdom. The main aim of the whole exercise
was to stamp out incipient rebellion, and in this the Host was
decidedly unsuccessful. The Presbyterians raised their own army
a year later, and went on to fight the government at the battles
of Drumclog, which they won, and Bothwell Bridge, which they
lost. Ten years later, when Charles II’s brother James II was
overthrown, the Presbyterians of the area settled by the High-
land Host leapt to arms.

Some obvious questions about the Highland Host have never
been satisfactorily answered. First, why did the government not
follow through on its threats? Many landowners including the
greatest (and the second greatest, the Earl of Cassillis) never did
sign the bond, and the Host simply left. Second, why did the
Host, reputed to be so barbarous, behave so moderately? For an
army of 8,000 to settle in hostile territory for two months, without
inflicting deaths, is abnormal by seventeenth-century standards.
The third and most puzzling question: why is the Host still “held
up to execration in the west,” when they behaved with compara-
tive moderation?

The main answer to the first question is that taking so many
fighting men south left the Highland estates vulnerable to
attacks from neighbouring groups, who had not contributed to
the Host. And in fact, even before the end of January, the Earl
of Caithness’ estates in Breadalbane had been plundered.\textsuperscript{17} For
this reason, none of the Host could afford to stay very long from
home. The Earl of Perth was soon having doubts about setting
out at all, when he realized that most of the Highlanders would
pass through his lands on the way to Stirling. Worse, they would
return the same way, and be able to pillage what they wanted to
take home. “If the Hyland-men march, Carrick and Galloway
[where the Host was originally bound] will not suffer half so
much as I, for not a man shall go to Stirling, but he must go through my bounds, and where they will go through the west once, I shall have Huntly, Athol, Caithness, Mar, Airly, evrie on[e] in his [turn] to destroy my people." This major flaw in the arrangements had perhaps not occurred to him when he decided to join the Host. Perth was actually writing to the Duke of Hamilton, on whose lands his men were about to descend, and it is rather surprising that he is looking for sympathy in that quarter. But it seems to be part of a general assurance that his intentions are honorable, that he has been pressed into service and will treat Hamilton’s lands with due consideration. Both men seem aware that enforced quartering and harrying are games that two can play, and this is one reason for the Host’s moderate conduct. If Perth had devastated Hamilton’s lands, Hamilton would eventually reply in kind, probably with the help of Argyle’s Campbells; and most of the other Highland leaders were also vulnerable, especially as their lands bordered the Lowlands.

An even more serious point, especially for the nobility, was that the Bond being pressed on Strathclyde might ben seen as going well beyond the usual requirement to keep the peace. The western landowners argued that being responsible for general law and order, and that they were not able to enforce religious conformity. At least on the latter point, they were probably correct. An edict of 1678, issued through the Duke of Lauderdale as administrator of Scotland, threatened the penalties of treason on any landowner who allowed a conventicle on his land. One of the renegade Presbyterian ministers, William Veitch, immediately held a conventicle on Lauderdale’s lands, to show that it was impossible to keep the law. The same edict also declared treasonous any landowner on whose lands a wanted man (such as a Presbyterian minister) was given assistance. This was an even more unpopular clause, even with John Graham of Claverhouse, the soldier principally responsible for enforcing the laws against the western Presbyterians over the next decade.

The landed classes feared that the government’s powers might be getting out of hand, that their own influence might be seriously weakened and their position made precarious. The leaders of the Highland Host seem to have had second thoughts
about enforcing the Bond. When the Duke of Hamilton refused to sign, he was effectively disarmed. This provoked a conflict between the Duke of Lauderdale and the Earl of Rothes, another member of the government (the Lord Chancellor). Rothes told Lauderdale that: "for his owne sake he ought not to suffer so strange a practise as to disarme a Duke, without laying to his charge any sort of crime." The concern is with a precedent that may erode the nobility’s rights. Ultimately the leaders of the Host came to distrust the whole process: they were anxious to get out of the Lowlands without incident, and Perth and Atholl actually went to London to complain that the Host should never have set out.

The later execration of the Highland Host, despite its comparatively moderate behaviour, not doubt arose partly from the Lowlanders’ bitter resentment at the indignity of being subdued by Highlanders, “a crew of barbarous and savage men of another language.” Their feelings perhaps come out best in a fairly temperate account by a contemporary. “You would have thought by their baggage that they had been at the sack of a besieged city, and therefore when they passed Stirling Bridge every man drew his sword to show the world they had returned conquerors from their enemies land.” The fact that the Highlanders had behaved temperately did not lessen the indignity of being conquered by them, and was not acknowledged. A contemporary poet writes: “Yea they more savage far then those were, Who with Kollkittoch and Montrose were.” Kollkittoch is Alasdair MacColla, and the poet has in mind such episodes as the sack of Aberdeen—in actuality, a very different episode.

Yet there is some justification for the Lowlanders’ execration of the Highland Host, or at least of the government’s intentions. Their initial fear was that the Host would carry Letters of Fire and Sword and kill them off in very large numbers; as had often been done in the Highlands. A friend of the Duke of Hamilton’s watched the Highlanders assembling at Stirling and sent him a report. “Itt wes talkt in plain tearms, that iff the Hyland men wer forst to march to the west to suppress a rebellion of the Wigs, they should not only have frie quarter bott liberty of plundering, and iff they pleased to settell themselves ther as a new plantation and possess the countrrey for a reward.” The prospects would then be bleak for the existing inhabitants of the country.

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Indeed, the orders given to the Host were ominous. They included complete indemnity for: “killing, wounding, apprehending, or imprisoning such as shall make opposition to our authority, or by seizing such as they have reason to suspect, the same being always done by order of our privy council, their committee, or of the superior officer.” These are wide powers, which might allow the Host to kill everyone who hesitated about signing the bond, or in some other respect was suspect. And this was the contemporary interpretation of those who saw the orders. One of the king’s officials comments that, “There has not beane in our tyme such an ample comission granted as the comitye [in charge of the Host] haith, ffor they have nott onely lyberty to sequester men’s estates and denounce them fugitives who will nott subscribe the Bond ffor keeping of the peace, Bbut, if they meet with the least opposition in their march, to putt all to the sword before them.” One of the Duke of Lauderdale’s comments, made in 1678, does suggest that he was considering a Roman peace. “It were better that the west bore nothing but windle-straws and sandy-laveroks, than that it should bear rebels to the King.” The belief that the government did indeed have such a fate in mind for the western Lowlanders, and that the Highlanders, with a little encouragement from their leaders, might have carried out wholesale massacres and settled the land themselves, explains much of the Lowlanders’ animus. They felt that the choice of troops was in itself an indication that the government was prepared to betray them.

Seventeenth-century Scotland now seems a distant world of “old, unhappy, far-off things.” Yet many of its political and military problems are versions (often simpler versions) of twentieth-century ones, and modern governments have sometimes repeated the mistakes of the Scottish administration, under Lauderdale. They should, of course, calculate whether moving troops into one area will create an undesirable vacuum elsewhere, and whether there are any political difficulties associated with the territories the troops must move through. They should be clear about their own motives: is the main purpose to keep warring factions apart, generally maintain law and order, or actually eliminate elements seen as disruptive? Lauderdale’s plans for the Highland Host seem to have hovered between these possibilities. It is also important to consider what the
government's intentions will appear to be, especially to those in areas where troops will be operating, and what long-term effects may result. Despite his occasional blustering, Lauderdale probably did not intend to seriously threaten genocide, and intensify the bitterness of the west-country men. Yet memories of the Highland Host seem to have had a part in raising the Ayrshire army that went north to fight the Highlanders in 1689.

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NOTES

3 John R. Elder, *The Highland Host of 1678* (Glasgow: John Maclehose, 1914) 3.
4 The speaker was Calgacus, leader of the Picts, in the course of a speech denouncing the Romans—or at least Tacitus attributes this speech to him. See, for example, Andrew Lang, *A History of Scotland*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1907) 8.
7 *Periods*, 34. (from John Fordun's Chronicle).
8 Stevenson, 20 & 63.
10 Stevenson, 295.


16 Elder 97. (Register Privy Council of Scotland, 22 March 1678, v. 578).

17 Elder 62. (Register Privy Council, Scotland, v (Third Series), 518.

18 Elder 36. (Historical MSS. Commision, Report XI, appendix vi, 162-63).


20 Claverhouse writes, in 1684: “For I declair I think it a thing not to be desyred, that I should be forfaite and hanged if my tenents wife, twenty mille from me, in the midst of hilles and woods, give mate or shelter a fugitive.” Charles Sanford Terry, *John Graham of Claverhouse* (London: Constable, 1905) 168-69. (Hist. MSS. Comm. Rept. xv, pt. viii, 290).

21 Elder 80.


24 Elder 18.

25 Elder 37. (Register Privy Council, Scotland, v (Third Series), 301.


28 In “The Solitary Reaper” Wordsworth imagines that the girl is singing, in Gælic, of “old, unhappy, far-off things,/ And battles long ago.”