

The Brooch of Lorn Diarmid Campbell, Kilmelford



The stone in the Brooch of Lorn is clearly Mediaeval. So the story of the brooch being torn from the shoulder of Robert Bruce at Dalri or Dal-Ri near Tyndrum when he and the remnants of his force were attacked by the men of the Lord of Argyll in 1304, need not be fictional. The present mounting is later. Twenty-two such crystal charm-stones are on record among Highland families.¹

After his killing of the ‘Red’ Comyn, Bruce had, in effect, arranged to have all the most powerful enemies set against him: The Pope, Edward of England, the Comyns who were the most powerful Norman family in Scotland, and the Lords of Argyll whose power was considerable in the west.

After his crowning at Scone, Bruce had been attacked in a wood near Methven by Sir Aylmer de Valence, a captain of Edward I of England. Due to the trees inhibiting the attacking chargers, Bruce and his closest allies escaped. They moved swiftly west and found sanctuary at St. Fillans below Dalri. For the rest of his life Bruce held that saint in affection. But news had travelled west and the (MacDougall) Lords of Argyll, kin by marriage to the Comyns, attacked and seemingly came away with the

¹ Alastair Campbell of Airds, *A History of Clan Campbell*, vol.1, Appendix 5, pp. 299-304, Crystal Balls and Brooches, Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

charm-stone in a setting of the time, torn from his cloak while Bruce and his men escaped east and south to the shores of Loch Lomond. There is still an ancient yew tree on the western shore where they are said to have landed when they crossed the loch. The poet Barbour who chronicled the life of Bruce has Sir Neil Campbell, father of Colin, first Campbell lord of Lochawe, go from there to the Campbell lands then in Cowal to raise boats. In the hills east of Caenloch Coalispuirt in Knapdale there is a broad hollow draining through a narrow ravine where, by the name of Lon-Ri and local tradition, Bruce is said to have put together his army before his fight to make Scotland his kingdom. But at Dal-Ri the loss of the crystal charm-stone brooch cannot have been a happy omen.

The old Lords of Argyll and the Isles were the descendants of Dougall, eldest surviving son of Somerled (c. 1100-1163). After his father's death, Dougall or his son Duncan gained the heartland of Somerled's sphere of influence with a base at the dun of Dunollie. Duncan later built their castle at Dunstaffnage and founded the Priory at Ardchattan. Younger sons of Somerled gained more peripheral lands, Ranald (father of Donald) based in Islay, Angus initially in Kintyre and grandson Ruairi in Garmorran, or Ardnamurchan and north. Somerled was called upon to make Dougall as Ri or king of the Isles following a victory over Godfrey the Norse king of Man in a long-ship or galley fight in the Sound of Islay in 1156.

The Lord of Argyll in 1304 was Alexander, son of Ewen and grandson of Duncan MacDougall. So it would likely be to Dunstaffnage that the charm stone brooch was brought back as a spoil of war by the men of Argyll in 1306. What is likely also is that the name Dal-Ri, vale of the king, was named for that event, that fight which resulted in the brooch to Lorn coming to Argyll.

The defeat of the Dougall Lords of Argyll – who were called in Latin 'de Ergadia' – by Bruce and his Douglas, MacDonald and Campbell allies in the Pass of Brander in 1308-9 is well known, yet the Argyll family seem to have retained the charm-stone brooch. And after that there were the generations of exile at the English court. Yet even there, their princely status and seamanship was recognized and the son of Alexander of Argyll was made the first Admiral of the English Navy and captured the Isle of Man from the Scots. One suspects that the stone returned to Argyll with

their descendant John Alanson or John *gallda* of Lorn when he and his line were reinstated as Lords of Lorn by David II, King of Scots. David and John/Iain had likely met when David was a captured exile at the English court.

If John Alanson or *gallda* married Christina of Craignish as some historians believe, although the lordship of Lorn passed to John's royal daughters by his second wife who was Robert Bruce's grand-daughter, he must have passed the charm-stone to his son Alan *Ruadh* by Christina, along with the lands of Dunollie. And there it remained until the Civil Wars of the 17th century. Although the lordship of Lorn had passed by marriage to the royal Stewarts, they realized the great power that the MacDougalls held in the culture of the Gael at that era. Although gradually that would be superseded by the rise of the Donald Lords of the Isles after the forthright Angus *Oig* of Islay's support of Bruce set his family on their further rise to power. The first MacDonald of Islay to proclaim himself Lord of the Isles was John, or Iain of Islay, in 1334. But the first Stewart Lords of Lorn made the MacDougalls of Dunollie the bailies of almost all the lordship and gave them the right to foster the Stewart heirs. That retained for the MacDougall family considerable influence.²

In the second half of the 16th century, the time after the Reformation of 1560 when a great release of energy had taken place, this was the era of Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth of England when even the bitterness of John Knox, born of his time as a galley slave, failed to dampen the exuberance of life. Dunollie may have been seen by Lowlanders as an alien Highland fastness, but the Renaissance also came to Argyll. Over the time of the Reformation, Bishop John Carswell had built the splendid palace-castle at Carnassarie. And not long afterwards Duncan, younger son of MacDougall of Dunollie, would create the miniature brilliant jewel of a castle at Gylen on the southern end of Kerrera. But first, perhaps he had been allowed by his elder brother to have the old charm-stone. This he managed to have re-set in a manner highly fashionable for the third quarter of the 16th century, just as was done with the charm-stones of the Ugadale and Lochbuie families. The stone stands proud in a scallop-edged

² The shifts of power in Argyll in the 14th and 15th centuries are ably outlined in Stephen Boardman's *The Campbells 1250-1513*, John Donald 2006.

reliquary setting that screws into the base of the brooch. The circular base is of decorative cast Scottish silver, from which tapering cones rise about the stone, each displaying a small freshwater pearl. The brooches of the MacLeans of Lochbuie and the Mackays – now descended to McNeills of Ugadale - both have brooches of a similar period and style that has led some to see these as the work of itinerant descendants of the Mediaeval and earlier court jewellers, from the days when there were a number of courts in the land, as in Ireland. But this has been questioned due to recent experience and the European rather than Celtic style of the patterns.

When, a few years ago, a precise copy was commissioned of the brooch for exhibition at Dunollie, the original being too valuable to risk on display, the prestigious Edinburgh jeweller Hamilton & Inches discovered that, being used to making cast silver but not to the soldered creation of the cones supporting the pearls, they had to do extensive research into historical methods and explore new ways of working. This is not to say that earlier craftsmen did not have such skills, they must have had them to create the three brooches surviving from Argyll families. This experience has led to the belief that these brooches were urban made. The subject clearly needs further research.

A carved stone figure saved from Gylen is believed to be of the one who commissioned the castle, Duncan himself. He is a trim-bearded man with his hair worn of a natural length; about his neck is a ruff in the fashion of that time, and on his chest, gathering a cloak about his shoulders, is a large brooch. About his waist is what looks like a chain belt holding the flaring folds of his pantaloons or belted coat. The stone is broken above the knees. The reasonable assumption is that this was Duncan MacDougall's likeness when the castle was constructed, and that the brooch shown could have been meant to depict the ancient charm-stone in the new setting. He eventually succeeded his brother at Dunollie and from him that family descends.³

The charm-stone brooch in the handsome late 16th century setting next appears during the Civil Wars of the 17th century. Montrose's Lieutenant, Alastair MacColla, had deserted the royal general to his defeat at Philliphaugh and had re-entered Argyll, burning and destroying as he went.

³ RCAHMS *Argyll Inventory*, vol.2, *Lorn*, pp. 217-223

General Leslie and his forces caught up with Alastair at Rhunahaorain in Kintyre, but MacColla himself escaped to Gigha and later to Islay, abandoning a garrison of MacDougalls and others at Dunaverty near modern Southend. He left no boats in Kintyre, so Leslie sent Dougall Campbell of Inverawe north to find and bring boats. Meanwhile Leslie led the army south to attack Dunaverty. Upon the garrison there refusing to surrender, the castle was besieged and, at the Old Testament style exhortation of the Covenanting representative of the Kirk, many of the prisoners were killed. Only the son of Dunollie and his followers were spared, whom he was allowed to lead into exile in France. News of the slaughter at Dunaverty spread throughout Argyll.⁴

After Inverawe arrived in mid Kintyre with the boats, Leslie and his army crossed to Gigha and then Islay, but although they captured Alastair MacColla's father at Dunivaig, the son had escaped to Ireland. He was killed there not long afterwards. Meanwhile Dougall of Inverawe was sent north again to join Leslie's commander who was about to besiege Dunollie. He in turn sent Dougall with a smaller force to attack the little garrison at Gylen on Kerrera. They were called upon to surrender and then to set the castle on fire, which they did.⁵

The brooch of Lorn had evidently been sent to Gylen for safekeeping and it would not have been left in the burning tower. So it seems likely that it was found on one of the prisoners. The Statistical Account states that it was taken by Inverawe and held in that family. But although it may have been handed to Inverawe by one of his men, it passed immediately into the hands of John Campbell of Bragleen. There is no Inverawe tradition or record of holding the brooch.

John Campbell of Bragleen was a hero in his day. Known as Iain *Beag* MacIain 'ic Dhòmhuill, there are a number of legends surviving about his prowess against MacColla, yet his respect for him. During the initial ravaging of Argyll by MacColla and his Irish in 1645-6, the house of Bragleen had been surrounded, with John himself inside. He burst out

⁴ Inverawe Papers in NLS, an account of the seige of Dunaverty by and Englishman present.

⁵ David Stevenson, *Alastair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the 17th Century*, John Donald 1980, and Inverawe Papers in NLS.

through the thatch with his sword. MacColla called to him ‘How would you act to me if I were you?’ John answered that he would set him in a ring of his men and give him the chance to break out if he could. At that he leapt off the roof, sword in hand and dodged about looking for the weakest place in the ring of men. Suddenly he flung his sword in the air, and as all looked up to see upon whom it might fall, he made his escape. Perhaps the brooch came to Bragleen at Gylen as a kind of reward for his courage. That of course is legend and conjecture. But Gaelic legends often are found to have a basis in fact.⁶

The Campbells, now Robertsons, of Bragleen were a branch of the Campbells of Lochnell, who are next heirs of the Campbell chiefly line should that fail. In 1819, John’s descendant, Major Campbell of Bragleen in Scamadale died, leaving no male heir but a widow and three daughters. This was after a period when so many families had lost responsibility for the communities on their lands following the Disarming Act after the 1745 emergency. Heritable jurisdictions were cancelled, so that the reasons for local leadership for defence or justice were removed. The linking of the Highland cattle economy with the richer Lowland economy had brought in cash rather than barter. The kindly custom of providing widows with liferent worked well until these were obliged to support more than one generation, when they upset the fragile balance of subsistence agriculture. Lands were being turned into estates and sold all over Argyll. One imagines that Bragleen’s widow looked into their charter chest and saw the brooch. She may have been in touch with Lochnell for advice as the head of their kindred. He was a trustee for his kinsman the late Major, an area where such relations still gave paternal service. The Major’s instructions had been that the brooch was not to be sold unless for the children’s education.

Colonel, later General, Duncan Campbell of Lochnell was also MP for Argyll and the Ayr boroughs. In 1794 he had raised the 98th, later renumbered the 91st Highland regiment that would become the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. He lived until 1837. He is said to have bought the brooch from the Bragleen family in order to provide for the education

⁶ Lord Archibald Campbell (Ed.) *Records of Argyll*, 1884, Traditions of Alasdair MacDonald, pp. 193-197, gives a series of Bragleen – MacColla legends. Followed by a MacDougall – MacColla legend.

of the daughters, the eldest of whom married Mr. Robertson from whom the present Robertsons of Bragleen descend.

This was the 'romantick' era of Byron, Scott and MacPherson. While the paternal lands were passing into other hands and began to be seen as 'property' or 'estates' rather than as a responsibility for the support of communities, where the senior Tacksmen gave local leadership, this disjunction tended to encourage an interest in a romantic view of the hardships of the past. Whatever motivated Colonel Campbell of Lochnell, it was surely a kindly and even statesmanlike spirit that suggested that he donate the Brooch of Lorn once again to the MacDougalls of Dunollie, heirs of Somerled and erstwhile Lords of Argyll.

Due to the age of his father William of Dunollie, it was his son, Captain John MacDougall, Younger of Dunollie, who accepted the brooch from Lochnell at a ceremony at Inveraray Castle in October 1824. One imagines them all dressed in the full regalia of the time, plaids, dirks, hunting horns and silver dags.

Today the Brooch of Lorn is seen as a focal icon for MacDougalls all over the world who, as if exiles, find their inheritance in their history far more interesting than many of those who live with it as an every-day experience. Their awareness of that history happily extends their sense of self and often results in support for the conservation and preservation of a rich inheritance to which we local people do not always give the same priority. The brooch, with those of Lochbuie and Ugadale, is also a unique part of the artistic culture of Scotland and Great Britain.

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The Brooch of Lorn was mentioned by Sir Walter Scott in his narrative poem: “The Lord of the Isles”

*Gem, ne'er wrought on Highland mountain,
Did the fairy of the fountain,
Or the mermaid of the wave,
Frame thee in some coral cave?
Did in Iceland's darksome mine
Dwarf's swarth hands thy metal twine?
Or, mortal-moulded, comest thou here,
From England's love, or France's fear?*

*Thy splendors nothing tell
Foreign art or faery spell,
Moulded thou for monarch's use,
By the overweening Bruce,
When the royal robe he tied
O'er a heart of wrath and pride;
Thence in triumph wert thou torn,
By the victor hand of Lorn!*

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