The confessions of Flora MacDonald

Flora MacDonald (National Galleries of Scotland)

Most people know the story of Flora MacDonald and how she helped Bonnie Prince Charlie escape from the Outer Hebrides 'over the sea to Skye' just as the government forces were closing in on him. Not many people, however, know that the very first account of these events - Flora disguising the Prince in women's clothes and pretending that he was her maid Betty Burke in order to smuggle him away to Skye - was given by Flora MacDonald herself, at **Applecross**.

Her story is contained in a manuscript, in the National Archives in London, entitled:

'Copy of the Declaration of Miss MacDonald, relating to the Pretender's Son.
***Apple Cross**, July 12 1746'.*

This is how she came to tell the story...

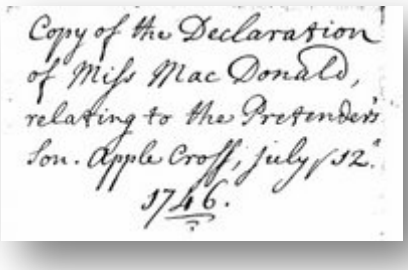
Exactly two weeks after Bonnie Prince Charlie's escape to Skye, Flora was arrested by the government forces and held aboard the prison ship HMS Furnace under the command of the 'notorious' Captain John Ferguson from Inverurie. Ferguson was known for his abuse of prisoners. One incident illustrating Ferguson's character was reported by Felix O'Neill a Jacobite captain in the Prince's service who had been captured shortly before Flora, 'I was ... brought before Captain Ferguson, who used me with the barbarity of a pirate, stripped me, and had ordered me to be put in a rack, and whipped by his hangman, because I would not confess where I thought the Prince was. As I was just going to be whipped, being already stripped, Lieutenant McGaghan of the Scots Fusiliers, who commanded a party under Captain Ferguson,

very generously opposed this barbarous usage, and coming out with drawn sword, threatened Captain Ferguson that he would sacrifice himself and his detachment rather than see an officer used after such an infamous manner'. During his search for Bonnie Prince Charlie, Ferguson had seized an instrument of torture known as 'the Barisdale' after MacDonald of Barisdale its inventor. Despite the belief, widely held even today, that no-one in the Highlands and Islands would give any information to the authorities about Prince Charles' movements, fairly soon after Flora's and the Prince's journey to Skye, the authorities knew all about it. About the 6th of July Ferguson captured one Lachlan MacMhurrich in Benbecula, who 'Being immediately put into Barisdale, confessed that the Younge Pretender left South Uist Satturday the 28th of last month. That he was gone to Trotness [Trotternish] a place in Skye.' Several other prisoners were also taken and made to confess, so that within two weeks of arriving in Skye her part in the escape was known and she was arrested.

Although Flora was to be imprisoned aboard Ferguson's ship, the Furnace, General John Campbell of Mamore, the officer in charge of the search for the Prince, ordered that Flora 'be used with the utmost respect'. It was to Campbell that Flora told her story in Applecross Bay on the 12th of July 1746.

Map of Applecross Bay (Dorret, 1750, NLS)

Flora's declaration


Copy of the Declaration of Miss Mac Donald, relating to the Pretender's Son. Apple Croff, July 12. 1746.

"Copy of the Declaration of Miss Mac Donald. Apple Cross Bay, July:12:1746.

"Miss McDonald, Daughter in Law of McDonald of Milton in Sky, being by General Campbell's order made Prisoner for assisting the eldest Son of the Pretender in his escape from South Uist, & asked to declare the Circumstances thereof, Says, That about six weeks ago, she left her Father in Law's House at Armadach [Armadale] in Sky, & went South to see some friends. Being asked "if she had any invitation from those who persuaded her to do what She afterwards engaged in for the young Pretender or any Body else, before she left Sky; answered in the negative and says that at the time of her leaving Sky, she did nor know where the young Pretender was, but only heard he was Some where on the long Island: that she stayd at (what they call) a Sheilling of her Brother's, on the Hills, near Ormaclait, the House of ClanRonald; and that about the 21st of June, O'Neil, or as they called him Nelson, came to where she stayd, & proposed to her, that as he heared she was going to Sky, that the young Pretender should go with her in Woman's Cloaths, as her Servant which she agreed to. O'Neil then went and fetched the young Pretender who was on the Hills not far off, when they settled the manner of their going.

"Miss MacDonald says, that after this she went & stayd with Lady ClanRanold, at her House, three Days, communicated the Scheme to her, and desired that she would furnish Cloaths for the young Pretender, as her own would be too little. During Miss MacDonald's stay at Ormaclait, O'Neil came frequently from the young Pretender to Clan Ronald's House to inform her where he was, what steps had been taken for their voiage, and at the same time to hasten her to get her affairs in Readiness for going off.

Miss MacDonald says, that the 27th past, she, Lady Clan Ronald, her eldest Daughter, & one John MacLean, who had by Lady Clan Ronald's order, acted as Cook to the Pretender during his stay on the Hills, went to a Place called Roychenish, where they found him, taking with them the woman's Apparel furnished by Lady Clan Ronald, he was dressed in.

Here they heared of General Campbell's being come to South Uist, & that Capn Fergussin was within a mile of them. When they got this Information, they were just going to Supper. But then went off very precipitately, & sat up all night at a sheilling called Closchinisch.

"Saturday, June the 25th the Cutter and Wherrier, which attended General Campbell having got from Bernera, near the Harris, through to the East side of the Long Island, & passing not far from them, put them again in great Fear, least any Body should land there. However they continued there 'till about 9 at night, when the young Pretender, Miss MacDonald, & one MacAchran, with five men for the Boat's Crew, imbarked & put to Sea, Lady Clan Ronald having provided Provisions for the voiage.

"The 29th about 11 in the morning they got to Sky, near Sir Alexander MacDonald's House. Here Miss MacDonald and Mac Achran landed, leaving the young Pretender in the Boat, they went to Sir Alexander Mac Donald's House; and from thence, Miss Mac Donald sent for one Donald Mac Donald, who had been in the Rebellion, but had delivered up his Arms some time ago. She imployed this Person to procure a Boat to carry the young Pretender to Rasay, after acquainting him with their late voyage & where she had left the young Pretender. Miss Mac Donald stayd & dined with Lady Margaret Mac Donald; but Mac Donald & Mac Achran returned to the boat, to inform what was done.

"Miss Mac Donald being asked why Rasay was pitched upon for the young Pretender to retreat to; she answered that it was in hopes of meeting Rasay himself, with whom he was to consult for his future security.

"After Dinner, Miss Mac Donald set out for Portree, it being resolved that they should lodge there that night; but on the Road, overtook the young Pretender & Mac Achran. They had been joined by Mac Donald of King's bury. She told she must call at Kingsbury's House, & desired they would go there also. Here, Miss Mac Donald was taken sick, & therefore with the other two, was desired to stay all night, which they agreed to. She had a Room to herself; But the young Pretender & Mac Achran lay in the same Room. At this time, he appeared in Woman's Cloaths, his Face being partly concealed by a Hood or Cloak.

"Being asked, if while they were at Kingsbury's House, any of the Family inquired who the disguised Person was; answers, that they did not ask; but that she observed the People of the Family whispering as if they suspected him to be some Person that desired not to be known and from the servants she found they suspected him to be Mac Leod of Bernera, who had been in Rebellion. But, being pressed to declare what she knew or believed of Kingsbury's knowledge of his Guest, owns, that she believes, he must suspect it was the young Pretender.

"The 30th of June, Miss Mac Donald set out on Horse back from Kingsbury's House for Portree, having first desired the young Pretender might put on his own Cloaths some where on the road to Portree, as she had observed that the other Dress rather made him the more suspected. Miss got to Portree about 12 at night, where she found Donald Mac Donald, who had been sent before to procure a Boat. The young Pretender & Mac Achran arrived about an Hour after. Here he took some Refreshment, changed a Guinea, paid the Reckoning, took his Leave of Miss Mac Donald & went out with Donald Mac Donald, but who, after seeing him to the Boat returned. She believes he went to Rasay, but can not tell what is become of him since."

Prince Charles disguised as Betty Burke (National Galleries of Scotland)

Routed o'er Hills the young Adventurer flies,
And in a Cottage, sinks to this Disguise,
Fled his gay Hopes, defeated his fond Scheme,
His Throne is vanish'd like a golden Dream,
By manly Thoughts He'd charm His Woes to rest,
In vain! Culloden still distracts His Breast.

Displayed at the 1889 Exhibition of the Royal House of Stuart. Item 865. Prince Charles Edward Disguised as a Woman. Mezzotint by **J. Williams.** Lent by Harry Thornber, Esq.

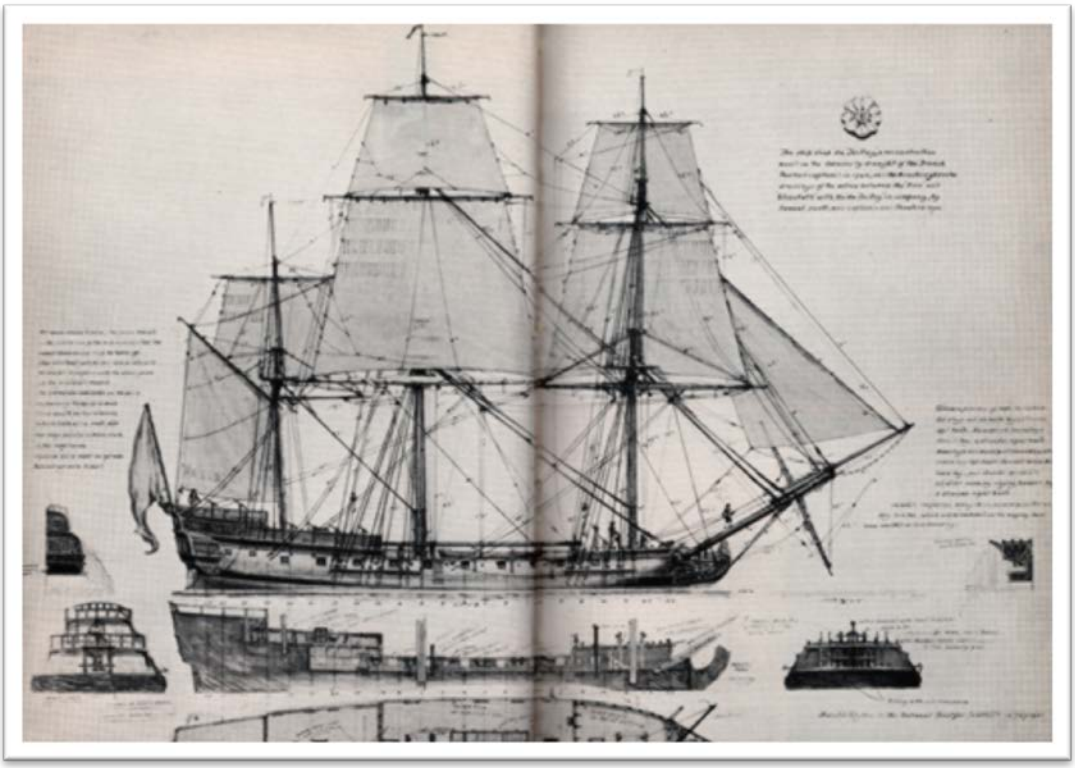
Applecross and the '45

Not much is known about what was happening in Applecross during and after the Jacobite rising of 1745-6. Many of the clan chiefs did not actively support the rebellion, despite being Jacobites at heart. Flora's own clan chief Ranald MacDonald of Clanranald did not take part, and neither did Sir Alexander MacDonald of Sleat whom Flora's stepfather served. In fact MacDonald of Sleat raised a militia for government in order to help in the search for Bonnie Prince Charlie. Like both of these families, the MacKenzies of Applecross had been 'out' in the previous Jacobite rising of 1715 and had temporarily lost their lands; and like them, the current laird of Applecross John MacKenzie was probably under great pressure from Duncan Forbes of Culloden not to join Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Duncan Forbes of Culloden - Lord President

Forbes, on behalf of the Hanovarian government, was active in 1745 cajoling and persuading many of the highland chiefs to stay at home. In October 1745 the laird of MacLeod wrote to Forbes about a visit to Applecross saying 'I think he has no intention to play the fool, and I hope he will comply with his chief's request' (i.e. not to join the rising). The ship which landed the Prince in Scotland at the start of the rebellion, Le du Teillay, actually called at Applecross on its return journey to France.

The Captain's log for Saturday 21 August, 1745 states 'I now found myself off a stretch of low-lying land, with a fine white mansion, surrounded by a small wood, belonging to Mr Albelecross [Applecross], who sent a boat out to enquire whether we were taking the Pretender back with us. We sent him a letter saying that we were not and that he ought, with all his men, to hurry up to join him.' Of course we know that the laird of Applecross did not hurry to join the Prince. His question 'whether we were taking the Pretender back with us' may suggest that MacKenzie of Applecross had heard that Charles' landing had not sparked a mass rising as had been hoped.



Le du Teillay

Applecross House (The 'fine white mansion') today

John MacKenzie of Applecross appears again briefly at the end of the rising. After leaving Flora MacDonald, Bonnie Prince Charlie went briefly to Raasay hoping to meet up with a French ship in order to return to France. In James Boswell's 'The journal of a tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson' Boswell reports that while the Prince was in Raasay it was thought that a French ship was to come to Lochbroom, 'among the MacKenzies.. Upon which young Rasay wrote to his friend, Mr M'Kenzie of Applecross, but received an answer that there was no appearance of any French ship'. It would appear therefore that while he did not join the rebellion, John MacKenzie of Applecross was regarded as a sympathiser, and was trusted enough to be consulted on the Prince's escape.

The clan chiefs and lairds throughout the western highlands and islands were in a very difficult situation during the search for Bonnie Prince Charlie. While they sympathised with him, and were mostly Jacobites at heart, the rising had failed and they had to continue living under the Hanoverian regime. Many clan chiefs actually raised militias on behalf of the government, while secretly helping Bonnie Prince Charlie to escape. Both Clanranald and Sleat carefully absented themselves during this period, each leaving their wives to help the 'Young Pretender'. Flora's stepfather Hugh MacDonald, factor of Sleat's lands at Armadale, was actually the captain of one of the militias searching for Charles, yet he was the one who suggested the plot to smuggle him to Skye, and provided Flora with a pass giving official permission for the journey.

Despite the widespread sympathy for the Jacobite cause, the government forces, led by Campbell of Mamore, were well informed of the Prince's movements, but were always one step behind. While torture was frequently used to obtain intelligence as we have seen, there were undoubtedly those who informed the government of what they knew more willingly. For example the Reverend John Macaulay, who was at

dinner with Clanranald on Sunday 27 April 1746 when news that the fugitive Prince had landed in Benbecula, immediately wrote to his father in Lewis asking him to inform MacKenzie of Seaforth's factor on Lewis to be ready to apprehend the Prince.

Another example of a 'tip off' almost led to the arrest of some fugitives near Applecross. On 14th July 1746, while at Gairloch, HMS Furnace received 'information that some Persons were concealed in a cave near AppleCross, uppon which orders were given to Captn Fergusin, Lieut McGackin and Lieut Hope with 30 sailors and what Fuziliers we had to go in the Wherries and Cutter in quest of them ... they returned the 17th having taken non of the Rebells but took a ten oared boat that attended them.' It is uncertain which cave the men were hidden in, but there is a cave near Salacher, on the coast road, marked on the Ordnance Survey maps as 'Uamh na h-armachd' which would mean 'cave of the armour'. However it has been suggested that it may be 'Uamh na h-ar-a-mach', 'cave of the rebellion'. I know of one story of fugitives coming to the sanctuary of Applecross after the battle of Culloden, though unfortunately I have very few details. Kenny MacRae told me before he died that my great, great, great, great grandfather was Donald Cameron, who I believe lived on the coast and who was 'the son of Hector Cameron of Lochaber who fell at Culloden'.