

The MacLaurin/Dreghorn Hoax 1781

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Abstract

In 1781 John MacLaurin, the Edinburgh Advocate who would later become Lord Dreghorn, matriculated Arms and was recognised by the Lord Lyon of the day as the Chief of the MacLaurins of Tiree. In this paper I show that the whole exercise was an elaborate ruse, principally a satire on the pomposity rife in the society in which he mixed but serving also to exorcise much personal bitterness arising from aspects of his personal life. There were no 'consequences' at the time, but 200 years later sadly some amateur historians may still be taken in by it - with the sort of collateral damage which only this exposure can repair.

Introduction: John MacLaurin's career and family

[John MacLaurin](#) was born in Edinburgh in 1734, the eldest son of the child prodigy and Mathematics Professor [Colin MacLaurin](#) who died when John was just 11 years of age, leaving the family in fairly straitened circumstances. His uncle was the celebrated Glasgow theologian Rev. [John MacLaurin](#).

He trained as a lawyer becoming an advocate and, after the matriculation we are considering here, going on to become a Senator of the College of Justice, taking his title from Dreghorn Castle, his residence. He wrote on a wide range of subjects including legal matters, poetry, philosophy and even fiction, including an opera, However we learn from the [Chalmers Biography](#) that

"...It has, however, been generally thought that these added very little to his reputation, the character of his poetry being that of mediocrity, and his prose neither very lively nor profound, though he occasionally exhibits learning and acuteness, and always an ardent love of liberty."

He married in 1762, but his wife, Esther Cunningham, died in 1780; of his 10 children just three survived their mother; of these the eldest son, [Colin](#) (born before 1770), suffering with what were described as "bouts of insanity" which would impair his own career as an advocate. Young Colin and his brother George (a writer (ie lawyer)) were also poets etc. Reprints of their works are available again today.

John MacLaurin had a powerful sense of satire, but his enunciation was inhibited by "a want of teeth". He mixed with the social, literary and scientific intelligentsia; his father had co-founded the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and John played a key part in securing its royal warrant some decades later.

Part I: The Achievement of Arms:

The blazon for this achievement of arms was reproduced by Margaret MacLaren of Maclaren in her 1960 publication "The Maclarens: a history of the Clan Labhran" (p122).

The details are these:

- 1. Shield:** Argent, a shepherd's crook sable
- 2. Crest:** A lady from the middle upwards vested vert, holding in her arms a child.
- 3. Supporters:** Two Tritons proper
- 4. Motto:** Bi'se mac ant's laurie

The Motto

To someone who knows no Gaelic this looks like Gaelic. So I started rummaging in Dwelly's Gaelic dictionary - I found nothing. So I turned to Neil Macgregor who suggested that "mac ant's laurie" should really be "mac an t' slabhraidh" - "the son of the pot-chain". This refers to the living arrangements where a hole in the roof served as a vent for smoke and a chain hung down from it to hold the pot over the fire.

So far so good, but what to make of "Bi'se"? Superficially this means "she was", but that made no sense, so Neil pondered this for a while before offering the suggestion that perhaps "Biadh se" was the intended phrase: "food is". However far more tellingly (as it was to turn out) he suggested that there could be an underlying insult, curse or some such implied. Sometimes an apparently mild Gaelic phrase carries underlying tones of a very different character.

So I turned to Ronald Black for further advice. He was able to tell me immediately that the "son of the pot chain" was none other than the Devil himself - who was supposed to be able to insinuate himself into a house through the smoke enveloping the pot chain. But he could make no sense of the first part. As a motto he correctly supposed that a phrase such as "kill the devil" might be more appropriate.

However, mindful of Neil's comments, I was immediately satisfied that the underlying meaning is "She was the Devil" and I was left with the matter of who "she" may have been. We note that the double layer of punning was created by breaking up and anglicising the spelling to show the word "laurie" - a pun on "Laurin".

The Supporters

MacLaurin's supporters are referred to as "Tritons". Another name for these is "Mermen" - ie the male equivalent of mermaids. However in any heraldic encyclopaedia Mermen are one example of "satyrs". Here we see another multi-layer pun. Maclaurin was a master of satire - and I would be fairly confident that it had not escaped his notice that the supporters in the achievement of the Chief of the Maclarens are mermaids (these taken from the crest of the Murray Earls of Atholl to whom they had had to turn, of necessity, for support in difficult times).

So here Maclaurin is saying that his arms are a satire and that he is really a Maclaren.

The Shield

Here we can see that the tinctures - the colours - are black and white. If only any legal case could be so simple! And the emblem which is meant to represent Maclaurin is a CROOK! Another self-referential owning up to exactly what is going on here!

The Crest

And so we come to the crest. Here again, Neil was able to help - for the green clothing clearly indicates that the woman is a fairy - and not a nice one, more a "bodach". And any child she is carrying is likely to be a changeling. Here we can note a juxtaposition which I had already spotted when examining the motto. The arms were matriculated in 1781, just one year after Esther had died. Seven of their children were dead and his son and heir was subject to "bouts of insanity" - an earlier generation (and even in some parts of the world today) the illness which young Colin was suffering from (a biochemical imbalance such as bipolar disorder, perhaps - and several males in the family would likely be well down the autistic spectrum) would have been understood widely as "possession by demons". Maclaurin may or may not have taken this view himself, but the crest and the motto allowed him to vent his extreme frustration and disappointment, parking the blame on someone who could not answer back.

Part 2: The Tiree Connection

Taken at face value, MacLaurin's recognition as chief of the MacLaurins of Tiree implies that there were or had been enough MacLaurins living on Tiree to constitute a "clan". For me there was some *prima facie* superficial evidence in terms of [one pedigree in the infamous MS1467](#). [See also [my paper](#) on this subject on this site.] On the one hand Ronald Black prefers the idea that this represents a clan by the name of "MacLavery", but I am sure for other reasons that the text we have is that of a scribe working from a written text he could barely read - so he did his best. So I set this supposed "t" to one side. Initially I had been dubious that main-line MacLarens would have bothered or wanted to feed into the Macdonalds' fabrication, so I was prepared to go along with the idea of a "clan" of Maclaurins on Tiree. The waters are further muddied by all parish records prior to 1775 having been destroyed. However we are very fortunate that subsequent records have been digitised [here](#) - and from this we can see that in the period to beyond 1800 not so much as a single entry pertaining to any Maclaurin is to be found.

Having reflected more about the situation of the Balquhidder-based Maclarens, I am now of the view that it was indeed they who supplied the (albeit pretty hopelessly inadequate) pedigree which Black calls "Maclavery". My reasoning is this:

- Their immediate neighbours, the Macgregors (in Glenorchy and Glenstrae), were participants
- There had been no [Earl of Strathearn](#) to depend on for support/protection for 30 years (Walter Stewart had died in 1437 and the land had reverted to the crown).
- James II had died in 1460 and in 1467 [James III](#) was just 15/6 years old.
- In 1465x6 there was a hiatus in James' guardianship between Gilbert, Lord Kennedy and Robert, Lord Boyd. Clearly these people with their own agendas were not to be relied on.
- James III was only strong enough to challenge the Lords of the Isles from 1475.

Under these circumstances one could see all too easily how c.1467 the MacLaren chief would want at least to keep on cordial terms with the Lords of the Isles.

The Maclaurin family background.

As we have seen, John MacLaurin himself was born in Edinburgh in 1734

His father, Professor Colin, was born in Kilmodan, in Cowall, Argyll in 1698

Colin's father, [Reverend John MacLaurin](#), was born in Inverary - we may hazard a guess at the birthdate around 1665x75.

John's father Daniel was born on Tiree - but moved to Inverary. Again we may hazard a guess at the birth epoch some time in the period 1640x55.

As we have seen there were NO Maclaurins on Tiree from 1775 and indeed it is likely that Daniel had been the last Maclaurin (apart, perhaps, for his parents) on the island when he left. How many generations there may have been there before him is difficult to say, but had it been any significant number one would expect some echo in the graveyard or in the parish records. So all in all we cannot have any confidence as to any length of residence on Tiree of Daniel's forebears - indeed even the name Daniel is suggestive of his having been a non-native.

Conclusion regarding Tiree

So John Maclaurin was technically correct - he did have an ancestor who came from Tiree 150 years before he matriculated, but again he was cocking a snook at the establishment where he remained a *parvenu*.

Part 3: The Granting of the Arms

[The Lord Lyon](#) of the day was John Hooke-Campbell of Bangeston, a member of the family of Campbell of Cawdor. Because Hooke-Campbell spent so much time in Wales, it is likely that the key decisions were actually made by Lyon Depute Robert Boswell of St Boswells, cousin of James Boswell and so likely personally known to John MacLaurin.

Technically Lord Lyon grants arms. He decides what the blazon shall be. However it is usual for applicants to "offer suggestions" and they can choose not to proceed with an achievement that does not please them. As we can see, the Lyon Office was either totally complicit or accepted MacLaurin's proposal without quibble. As for the recognition as clan chief, the Clan System had been over for 35 years following Culloden, so by now in legal and *realpolitik* terms it really was meaningless frippery. [Which having been said a Campbell of Cawdor would likely have had serious reservations.] Whether Boswell was complicit I cannot say, but it interesting to note that despite being Lyon Clerk and Lyon Depute he was passed over for the title of Lord Lyon - suggestive of potential fellow feeling between him and John MacLaurin.

Part 4: Dicusssion

John MacLaurin had a very sharp brain and was born into a family of high achievers. It would be extremely hard for him to compete with his father or his uncle - and this brings with it its own psychological implications.

Rather like the poet [Robert Burns](#) he found himself mixing with people far above what had been his family's station. His father was friendly with Sir Isaac Newton, his son with Sir Walter Scott. John himself was an active member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Unlike Burns, John made a huge amount of money. All along he knew that he had had to apply himself very hard to be on level terms with those who were born to wealth and privilege. So matriculating arms and giving himself the cachet of a clan chief allowed him some of the outward trappings of those who surrounded him. He knew that there was an unreality about it all - but at heart was there really so much difference between his and theirs?

His family background was steeped in religion and yet his own circumstances were such as would make anyone doubt the existence of a beneficent higher power. So it is not surprising that he would exhibit an acerbic wit, that satire would suffuse his writings and that a bitterness would underlie his view of his own lot - his success notwithstanding. The frippery will not have diminished his envy of Burns' literary accomplishments and the carefree aspects of the life he was able to live - and they did fall out.

Despite all this, the inverted inferiority complex manifested in the disdain for the privilege enjoyed by so many of his circle which is contained in his achievement of arms remained a private joke and harmed no-one. He will have enjoyed the satisfaction when anyone deferred to him on that basis, reinforcing his view that he had indeed outwitted his social superiors.

I hope that he would be chuckling that he has now been found out, especially by one who admires the wit and the multiple layers of the craft he applied.

References

These are all noted in the text and/or embedded as hyperlinks

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