The treasure of Port Elizabeth

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

WITH the appearance in South Africa of a cache of documents relating to the Argyll island of Coll, the extraordinary story of Boswell's treasure-trove has just taken another twist.

The discovery of the papers of James Boswell, laird of Auchinleck, at three different times and in three different locations – in France, Ireland and Scotland – was one of the literary sensations of the century from 1840 to 1940. It all began when a Major Stone of the East India Company made a purchase in a shop in Boulogne. It came wrapped in a letter bearing Boswell's signature. The shopkeeper, Madame Noël, explained that she had got it from a hawker of waste paper who visited the town every few months.

Stone bought from her ninety-seven letters written by Boswell to his lifelong confidant William Temple. But that was only the start. Further finds at Malahide and Fettercairn were so huge, so dramatic, so valuable, and spawned so many tomes that an extra book was written about the process of discovery, David Buchanan's "Treasure of Auchinleck". Now another little chapter may be added at the end.

Boswell and Johnson were storm-stayed in Coll from 3 to 13 October 1773. As the tempest raged around the house of Hugh MacLean of Coll at Breacachadh, Boswell rummaged through his charter-chest to pass the time. Being an Edinburgh lawyer he had an interest in such things. MacLean himself was away, and his son Donald didn't mind a bit.

Boswell took some notes and copied some interesting passages. He wrote about it all in his book, "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides". There was "the oldest charter of Coll which the family has", dated 1 December 1528. There were two letters from the marquess of Montrose, written in the interval between two bloody battles against the Covenanters in 1646. And there was a marriage contract from 1649.

From Boswell's own century there was much, much more. There was a strange poem in English written in 1729 called "Nature's Elegy upon the Death of Donald Maclean of Coll". This was Hugh MacLean's father. Boswell showed it to Dr Johnson, who wondered who had written it and suggested: "The Ghost of Ossian?"

"I suppose it has been some country schoolmaster," said Boswell.

"The epitaph," said Johnson, "is not so very bad." And he read from it what was to be on Donald's tombstone.

Nature's minion,
Virtue's wonder,
Art's corrective
Here lyes under.

"What does 'art's corrective' mean?" Boswell asked.

"Why," said Johnson, "that he was so exquisite that he set art right when she was wrong."

There were two items from the year 1737. One was a letter to the laird of Coll from Duncan Forbes of Culloden, a quintessentially decent man who later did more than anyone to try and prevent the '45 happening, keeping MacLeod of MacLeod and MacDonald of Sleat on the Government's side, only to see its bloodiest massacre taking place on his own estate. In 1737 he was acting as law agent for the duke of Argyll, and this letter (as we know now!) shows him agreeing that that the laird of Coll was paying a very high rent for the two bits of Coll that belonged to the duke.

The other was a remarkable letter from four gentlemen in Lochaber, all called Dugall Cameron. They were MacLonich Camerons, and the lairds of Coll had an agreement that, in return for a favour done far back in the mists of time, "even if a MacLonich arrives at Breacachadh at midnight with a man's head under his oxter, he will receive protection".

Well, says the letter, a young MacLonich is “alledged to have been accessory to the killing of one of MacMartin’s family”, and the MacMartins are after his blood. The young man is in Ardnamurchan now but is being threatened again. “Therefore your favour and protection is expected and intreated during his good behaviour, and failing of which behaviour you’ll please use him as a most insignificant person deserves.”

The story has a happy ending. The young man duly received protection. “And,” says Boswell, “his son has now a farm from the Laird of Coll.”

Boswell noted many letters relating to the period of the ’45. Two of them, both copies of items known from elsewhere, were outstanding. One was written by MacLeod of MacLeod to MacDonald of Kingsburgh, warning him that the fugitive Prince Charles was likely to arrive and throw himself on his mercy. “It will then be in your power (I hope you will use it) to aggrandize your family beyond many in Scotland . . . You know your reward,and I hope you will do your duty to yourself, your family and country.”

Says Boswell: “What a shocking exhortation!”

The other was written in the early spring of 1745, before Culloden took place, from two of the Jacobite chiefs, Lochiel and Keppoch, to Stewart of Invernahyle in Appin, asking him to pass on a message to the Campbells that “their burning of houses and stripping of women and children and exposing to the open field and severity of the weather, buring of corns, houghing of cattle, and killing of horses” will not be tolerated. They will ask the Prince for permission to enter Argyll and “hang a Campbell for every house that shall hereafter be burnt by them”. Lochiel adds a P.S. in his own hand, pointing out that it was his own people in Lochaber who had been suffering from “my pretended Campbell friends”. He concludes: “I shall only desire to have an opportunity of thanking them for it in the open field.”

Boswell read this letter to Johnson and called it a good one. Johnson replied: “It is a very good one, upon their principles.”

The final item was such a curiosity that Johnson devoted a paragraph to it in his own book. Apparently the people of Tiree (always a fertile island) were so plagued by beggars that they had a formal compact drawn up in which they agreed with each other “to grant no more relief to casual wanderers”, as Johnson put it. The reason was that “they had among them an indigent woman of high birth, whom they considered as entitled to all that they could spare”.

Johnson says the document “was never made valid by regular subscription”, or as Boswell puts it, “This agreement, I was told, never took place. Mr Johnson says he was glad of it.”

The last MacLean of Coll sold his island in 1856. A collateral descendant, the historian Nicholas Maclean-Bristol, restored the medieval castle of Breacachadh in the 1960s, and lives there still. (It stands beside the “new” house where Johnson and Boswell stayed.) All he knew about the missing documents was that in 1897 they were in Torquay in the possession of MacLean’s daughter, a Mrs Hamilton-Dundas. He has a list of them made at that time by his great-uncle, Hector A C Maclean.

In 1958, in a dramatic scene reminiscent of one in “The Treasure of Auchinleck”, Maclean-Bristol went to the Scottish Record Office to look for them, and was referred to an Edinburgh solicitor. A box marked “Maclean of Coll” was identified, opened – and found to be empty.

Last year the phone rang. It was the SRO again, now renamed the National Archives of Scotland. A man called Bob Horlock was wanting to lend the NAS some old Maclean of Coll papers in return for translations. He was a part-time dealer from England, a schoolmaster, and he had bought them from a dealer in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. “Are you interested?”

“No, but we know someone who might be.”

By telephone, Maclean-Bristol got back through the chain to the dealer in Port Elizabeth. This dealer wouldn’t reveal the seller’s name, but Maclean-Bristol believes it to have been a descendant of Mrs Hamilton-Dundas. Apparently the house was being cleared out, and the dealer said: “What’s in that box?”

“Oh, just some old papers.”

Many people don’t appreciate the value of grimy old papers, or even medieval charters written on vellum. One link in this particular chain (none of the above) suggested such things were only good for making lampshades. Maclean-Bristol has purchased the lot: the Montrose letters from the Port Elizabeth dealer, the rest from Bob Horlock.

The quantity is enormous. There are 138 documents ranging in date from 1528 to 1928, including five of the twelve items (or pairs or groups of items) described by Boswell. “Most of the Jacobite stuff has gone,” says Maclean-Bristol. “It must have caught someone’s eye.”

It has all happened just in the nick of time. Maclean-Bristol’s latest book, “From Clan to Regiment: Six Hundred Years in the Hebrides 1400–2000”, all 720 pages of it, was in proof when the treasure arrived. “I spent fifty years looking for those papers,” he says. “By the time the box arrived I was hoping they wouldn’t contain anything new!”

“From Clan to Regiment” will be published next month at £45 by Pen & Sword Books, Barnsley, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk. We’ll soon know whether they contain anything new or not. Maclean-Bristol has added a postscript . . .

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