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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Scottish clans

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Résumé

This entry examines the social structures, manners and sociability of the Scottish clans during the long eighteenth century. It discusses the debates on their place in the Scottish and British societies in the context of the Union of 1707 and of the Jacobite rebellion.

In the eighteenth century, Scottish society was still mainly structured into clans, or extended families, subdivided into multiple branches. These were led by a chief. Among the most famous clans were the MacDonalods, the Campbells, the MacKenzies, the Grants or the MacLeans.

Clans are often associated with the Highlands and the Isles of Scotland but they were in fact present everywhere in the kingdom. They could be divided into two distinctive groups according to their organisation. The first category of clans living in the mountains and in the isles had a patriarchal system (the word 'clan' in Gaelic means 'children'). Their system was based on tanistry, an ancient Celtic law by which a chief can theoretically be replaced by any person believed to be strong and courageous enough to defend the group. Such ideas were the result of the necessity of protecting the group. In practice however, the title and rights of clan chieftains were often passed hereditarily. Their geographical situation, far from the central authority, could force them into an autonomous self-dependent organisation and sometimes into autarky, especially in winter. Sociability was limited to the everyday interaction with people at home and in the village. Travellers were few. The second category of clans lived in towns and cities, which were mainly concentrated in the Lowlands. They had a feudal system established during the Norman invasions. Their social structures and manners were similar to the ones in English towns.

Few clans were Catholic and most were Episcopalian, but the association of some of them to the Jacobite cause generalised the idea, especially in England, that they were all Catholics. The Catholic community had connections with the continent that fostered transnational sociable practices. Indeed, young Catholic Highlanders were sent to Scots colleges in Holland, France, Spain and Italy to be trained as priests. Those who came back to their native land shared what they learnt in what was then considered the best European civilised and learned societies.

The clans of the Lowlands, or those living in large towns of the North such as Aberdeen, experienced better connections with the central institutions and power. They modelled their system and social life on the ones of the British capitals of Edinburgh and London; sociability and politeness being key components of the lives of the local elites. As an expression of the gap existing between these two worlds, the Highland clans would traditionally despise the clans of the Lowlands for their lack of courage as much as the Lowlanders despised them for their lack of refinement.¹ Letters and reports about Highlanders usually describe them as primitive, uneducated, poor and dirty people² unable to speak English.³ The fact they spoke Gaelic widened the gap. Scottish Gaelic was associated to Irish to emphasise both its oddity and the idea that it was not British. The *Society for the Propagating of Christian Knowledge* tried to limit its use in the Highlands by introducing a Bible in English and promoting educational classes in English.⁴

Up until the end of the seventeenth century, the reputation of the Highland clans was also one of cattle-thieves and uncivilised groups of people hidden in the most remote places of Scotland. The Statutes of Iona (1609), which obliged all the Highland chiefs' sons to come and study to Edinburgh or Glasgow as a way to educate them as loyal Protestants, had been an early attempt to 'civilise' them. With the exile of the Stuarts to the continent in 1688, their reputation became one of rebels, Jacobites and anti-union supporters, even though this was true for only a minority. Letters and reports circulating in Scotland and England denounced the rebellious character of the Highlanders. Highlanders were keen to show their 'loyalty', even though the meaning of that term was contested. For instance, in April 1713, a response to a *Vindication against the Highland Clans* was published by James Watson in London to explain that the Highlanders supporting the Jacobite cause were in fact loyal to the

Scottish/British Monarchy, since they supported the direct heirs of their first common king, James VI of Scotland and I of England (1567/1603-1625).⁵ Such views were challenged by unionists who saw loyalty to the Hanoverians as of paramount importance.

Following the Jacobite rebellion of 1715, George Wade was asked by George I to find solutions to control the Highland clans. He commissioned a report on the condition of Scotland (Moffat 91). The 'Highlands question', and the taming of their clans, became a great concern in the intellectual and scientific circles. Lectures and readings of letters and testimonies from travellers who went to these remote places would take place in the drawing rooms or in the clubs and societies of Scotland and England. A *Memorial* about Highland clans, for instance, was sent to a circle of friends in England in 1724 to explain that these people needed to be educated in order to join the British civilised world. Their ignorance and unruly manners – lacking education and models of sociability to follow – were depicted as a threat to the Union. Their attachment to the Jacobite cause was seen as stemming from this (TNA, SP54). As a direct consequence of George Wade's reports and public discourses in clubs and societies, schools and roads were financed to link these remote regions to 'civilisation'.

The clans had the reputation of following different social rules. When Lowland societies and ladies in drawing-rooms debated on husbandry and the status of women, the Highland clans were referred to as societies apart. Marriages, for example, were organized between two chiefs of two different clans or had to be authorized by the chief when the bride and the groom were of the same clan. The union would become valid after twelve months if the woman managed to be with child by then.

The failure of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745-1746 marked 'the beginning of a long end for clans' (Moffat 14, 108). Clans were broken. Many clansmen and clanswomen moved to the cities or emigrated to America. Some even participated to the imperial schemes of the East India company. Their (sometimes invented) folklore (kilts, bagpipes and highland games, etc.) was kept alive by societies in Scotland, England, Canada or the United States of America as well as in the novels by Sir Walter Scott, whose stories about them were fashionable among the high society of the time.⁶ Their image changed as well when James Macpherson, a poet, claimed (falsely) that he discovered a lost epic poem on the Celtic tales of Fingal composed by Ossian. He published the poem, offering the readers an idealized romantic image of the Highlands and their people. It became such a success that Dr Samuel Johnson and James Boswell went there to check how true this image was. Their critical testimonies were read in British sociable circles and participated in making tours of the Highlands fashionable.

The Highland clubs and societies that emerged in the eighteenth century participated in the rehabilitation of the clans as well as in their reconciliation with the British Monarchy. The *Highland Society*⁷ of London (1778) worked at preserving ancient Highland traditions. It was linked to the *Highland Society* of Edinburgh (1784)⁸ which worked for the promotion and modernization of the Highlands both by bringing Enlightenment ideas of improvements into these remote places and by spreading a positive image of them. For example, they launched projects for scientific enquiry into agricultural improvement. They believed they could bring

them to civilisation by placing them at the centre of Enlightenment debates meant to improve society in general.

Thus, these Societies worked to end the Highlands' isolation from the rest of Great Britain by introducing knowledge and new technology there. The purpose was to create a sort of British homogeneity and uniformity to reinforce the Union. Yet they also worked for the promotion of a specific Highland clan culture. Clan societies grew, such as the *Buchanan Society* (1725) or the *Clan Gregor Society* (1822). These reflected on aspects of the Highland culture, offered help through poor relief actions or acted to improve access to knowledge and scientific breakthroughs to improve their quality of life more generally.⁹ The *Highland Society* of Scotland claimed that it supported the preservation of the language, poetry, and music of the Highlands. In 1807, the *Highland Society* published the 'original' Gaelic text of the Ossian poems. Their promotion of Ossian's romantic images of the Highlands participated in the invention of the 'Highland spirit', which became very popular. McElroy suggests that 'Highland Societies perhaps more than any other force, made the dress and culture of Highlandism the universally recognized identity of Scotland and even the most identifiable image of Britain' (McElroy 154). The Highland societies thus played an important part in the positive representation of the Highland clans, including during the visit of king George IV to Edinburgh in 1822.

George IV's visit was the first royal venue in over a century. Sir Walter Scott was in charge of organizing the event with David Stewart of Garth, one of his friends and founder of the *Celtic Society*. Stewart was offered the opportunity to design a kilt for George IV. Scottish tartans were already a curiosity in the upper British circles. Prior to the event, in 1815, the *Highland Society* of London had each of the clan chiefs send a sample of their clan tartan to be deposited and registered (Moffat 162). Scott and Stewart asked all the clans to be presented to the king in their own tartan. The ceremony was such a success that it became a fashion for all rich Scottish families to create their own tartan.

The 'union between the Highlands and the Lowlands was perhaps an even greater influence on Scottish national life and character than the union of Scotland and England'.¹⁰ The Highland Societies promoted the reconciliation of the clans in Scotland as a promise of unity for Great Britain. With them, the Highlanders had now become an accepted part of Scottish society.

1. William F. Skene, *The Highlanders of Scotland, Their Origin, History, and Antiquities, with a Sketch of Their Manners and Customs* (Vol. 1, London: John Murray, 1837).

2. Unknown, 'Memorial Concerning the State of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland', 1724 (Dec.), (TNA, Fol. SP 54/14/38); Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London. Containing the Description of a Capital Town in that Northern Country; With an Account of Some Uncommon Customs of the Inhabitants. An Account of the Highlands, with the Customs and Manners of the Highlanders. (Vol. 1 & 2. London: S. Birt, 1726).

3. Highlanders: Account describing their Clan structure, Weapons, Dress and Way of Life, 29 Dec. 1724 (TNA: SP54/14/35).

4. Alistair Moffat, *The Highland Clans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), p. 82.

5. Pamphlet. Ridpath, *The Honourable Chiftains of the Highland-Clans, Vindicated, From the False Aspersions* (London: James Watson, 1713).
 6. Further reading: Robert Withington, 'Scott's Contribution to pageantic Development: A Note on the visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1622', *Studies in Philology* (vol. 17, n° 2, April 1920, University of North Carolina Press) p. 121-125.
 7. Minute Book of the Highland Society of London, 8 March 1784 (Manuscript, NLS reference: Dep.268/21).
 8. (<https://digital.nls.uk/learning/scottish-enlightenment/clubs-and-societies/>).
 9. *Edinburgh Almanac, Or Universal Scots and Imperial Register for 1828* (Edinburgh: 1828), p. 339.
 10. D. McElroy, *The Literary Clubs and Societies of Eighteenth Century Scotland, and their influence on the Literary Production of the period from 1700 to 1800* (Thesis. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1952), p. 345, 559.
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Minute Book of the Highland Society of London ([1784](#)).

[Highland Society London \(1784\)](#)