

HIGHLAND CHIEFS AT THE TOWER IN 1745

Read by Historian Bill Fraser

27 June 2011

I rise with considerable trepidation to deliver this paper to such a learned Association as this. However, I am somewhat encouraged that this is likely to be my first and last experience of addressing you and likewise of you having to listen to me. Whilst I did not distinguish myself academically at school, during my last year I was awarded the History Prize. My History Master was the Rev John Scott who in a sense followed me into the City because in the late 1970s, over twenty years after I had left school, he became Rector of St Michael's, Cornhill.

The title of my paper is 'Highland Chiefs at the Tower in 1745'. No doubt many of you will recall from your school days the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745—the Jacobites being those who supported the claims of James II and his descendants rather than William and Mary and later the Hanoverian Georges. This was a time of considerable unrest in England and Scotland and peace really only broke out after the Battle of Culloden Moor in 1746—but at what a cost. This was the last pitched battle to take place on British soil and it was a ferocious battle with up to 2000 Jacobites killed or wounded compared to 50 killed and 259 wounded on the British Army side. Following that battle, the Jacobites were finally defeated and those who led the risings were arrested and many were tried for Treason and executed in Carlisle, York, Manchester and on Kennington Common and, as we will hear, at the Tower of London.

Incidentally, the British Army was led by the twenty-five year old Earl of Cumberland who was called "The Butcher" because of the severity of his actions.

Revisiting the events of that time it is horrifying to read of the casual brutality which was handed out in almost all areas of life. No mercy was shown to the defeated forces and I say this to warn you that some of the events I describe are gruesome in the extreme.

I will start by referring to the trial in Westminster of three Scottish noblemen each of whom was imprisoned in the Tower. I will then trace in more detail the life and times of Simon Fraser, The Lord Lovat, Head of the Clan Fraser, who was tried for treason in the Great Hall at Westminster and then was the last man – ever I suspect – to be beheaded at the Tower.

Following the Battle of Culloden Moor, the Earls of Cromarty and Kilmarnock and Lord Balmorino were each arrested, imprisoned in the Tower and then

taken to Westminster to be tried for Treason by their peers. The two Earls pleaded Guilty in the hope of a light sentence but Lord Balmorino pleaded Not Guilty as he said he was not present when the crimes he was accused of took place and he questioned the authority of the court. The two Earls made heartbreaking and, especially in the case of the Earl of Cromarty, a very pathetic plea for mercy. This was to no avail and all three were found guilty and were sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered—I will spare you a description of what this actually involved as in each case the sentence was changed to beheading because of their noble rank.

All three were returned to the Tower from where the Earls of Cromarty and Kilmarnock petitioned the King for mercy. Lord Balmorino would not compromise his principles and did not enter a petition. Mainly due to the pleadings of his pregnant wife, the Earl of Cromarty was successful in his petition.

On the appointed day the Earl of Kilmarnock and Lord Balmorino were collected from their cell in the Tower by the Sheriffs of the day and taken to the scaffold on Tower Hill. Lord Kilmarnock's sentence was carried out without any real incident but in the case of Lord Balmorino the executioner had to make three blows before successfully severing the noble Lord's head from his body.

I now turn to Lord Lovat, Simon Fraser. This was a remarkable man in many ways. From fairly early in his life he had an ambition to be not only the Chief of Clan Fraser but to be the greatest and most revered Chief of all Highland Clans of all time. The Fraser country was in and around Inverness, especially towards the north through Beaulieu into Ross-shire and out to the West.

The Frasers were originally of French descent but by the time Simon Fraser was born, the French influence had been overwhelmed by Highland customs and traditions—even so in Simon's life we will see there was a strong French recognition in his conscience.

At the age of about sixteen Simon entered Aberdeen University and graduated as a Master of Arts. He left university as a fluent speaker of French and German and with a very clear understanding of Latin in addition to speaking his native Gaelic and of course English.

At that time his cousin Hugh Fraser was Lord Lovat. He had married a daughter of the Marquis of Atholl and there were four daughters of the marriage. Without a son, on Hugh Fraser's death, the title would pass to Simon's father and then to his elder brother. However fate intervened and not only was Simon's elder brother killed at the battle of Killiecrankie but Hugh then died, making Simon's father Lord Lovat and Simon next in line.

It then emerged that the Atholls had insisted on a prenuptial agreement which said that in the event of Hugh's death, and if there were no sons, then the title

would pass to the eldest daughter—who was then just 10 years old. The validity of this contract was in some doubt but Simon thought up a scheme whereby he would marry his late cousin's widow in the hope of endearing him and the Frasers to her family. Therefore, Simon with a force of 300 men visited the Dowager Lady Lovat and not only forced her into a marriage ceremony but also into an act consummating the marriage. An accusation of rape was made and held over Simon for some years but it was never really pursued and eventually dropped as the Dowager, now Simon's wife, always declined to testify against him much to the disgust of her family. The marriage was eventually dissolved.

As a result of all this, relations between the Murrays of Atholl and the Frasers were very strained and the Atholls took out a High Court action accusing Lord Lovat, his son Simon and other Frasers, of High Treason. They failed to answer the charge and when Simon's father died making Simon Lord Lovat and Chief of the Clan, Simon confronted a large force of Atholl men with a much smaller force of his own and won an overwhelming victory. Simon made the Murray leaders take a humiliating Oath declaring that they would forever stay away from Fraser territory.

Lord Lovat succeeded in obtaining a Royal Pardon for the treason accusation which had been brought by the Murrays. It then became apparent that the young Lord Lovat had been talking to the exiled Court of the Stuarts at St Germain en Laye in France. As word on this matter spread, Lord Lovat had to flee the country and he spent the next ten years in France during which time he was admitted to the Catholic Church.

At first he led a quiet existence, but all the time he was trying to gain favour and influence and after a while he succeeded in gaining the confidence of King Louis XIV. This, however, was not to last and he was sent on retreat to St Omer.

Returning to Scotland after Queen Anne's death, Lord Lovat was at first inclined to sympathise with the Jacobite invasion of 1715 but he then changed his mind and raised an army in opposition to King James. For this, Lord Lovat was called to London and highly praised by the King.

Returning to Inverness as an esteemed public citizen with the approbation and support of the King, Lord Lovat was made Sheriff and for some years he had enormous power, respect (or fear) and authority throughout the Highlands and especially in Fraser territory.

However at the time of the 1745 uprising, despite apparently assuring the English (Hanoverian) Government of his support, he was in fact in league with, and supporting the rebellion, with men and money. When this duplicity was uncovered after the Battle of Culloden Moor, Lord Lovat was arrested, brought to the Tower and charged, again, with Treason.

His trial took place in Westminster Hall beginning on 9th March 1747. It lasted for 7 days before his peers found him Guilty and passed the sentence of death.

Despite this sentence Lord Lovat seemed by no means intimidated by the fate which awaited him. As he was seated in his carriage to be returned to the Tower an old lady thrust her face before him and shouted "You'll get that nasty head of yours chopped off, you ugly old scotch dog" to which his Lordship, who was a master of the one line put down, shouted back "I believe I shall, you ugly old English bitch".

Following his return to the Tower, Lovat declined to apply for the Royal Mercy, saying the remnants of his life were not worth asking for—he was about eighty years old.

Whilst awaiting his execution one morning a Tower attendant enquired of his health to which Lovat replied "I am well sir. I will shortly be leaving this corruptible world for another incorruptible world high above".

On the day of his execution he ate a hearty breakfast and when Mr Sheriff Alsop called for him he said "Gentlemen, I am ready". On the scaffold he gave a purse of gold to his executioner and bade him to act his part properly saying "if you do not, and I am able to rise again, I shall be much displeased with you". Lovat's last words were a quote from Horace "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori".

Such was the interest and excitement at this execution that some of the specially erected scaffolding on Tower Hill collapsed and about twenty spectators died.

Lord Lovat always wanted and believed that his body would be returned to his native Highlands for a traditional Highland funeral with a massive march through the Glens with bagpipes playing. Fearing that this would in fact happen, the Government would not release his body. He was buried in the Tower and a few years later his body was interred in the Crypt of St Peter ad Vincula. It was suggested that for some years the Tower was haunted by the headless body of Lord Lovat.

This was a remarkable man who, to his credit, was a charismatic leader, highly intelligent, a romantic and, above all, a Scottish Patriot but he had flaws and perhaps the most serious of these was his vanity and the hypocrisy which characterised much of his dealings and which caused him once to be described as a person "more crooked than a corkscrew". Incidentally, following the battles of 1745 and 1746 it is said that the Fraser Clan had lost so many men that it was in danger of extinction so the Chief offered a "bag of meal" to anyone who would change their name to Fraser. Those who accepted became known as the 'Bag of Meal Frasers' and it is they who spell their name with a 'Z'.

In conclusion, I must correct any allusion you might have that the Eleventh

Lord Lovat's vanity and hypocrisy is a typical characteristic of the Frasers. I would do this by reminding you of another Simon Fraser DSO MC, who was the Fifteenth Lord Lovat. He was one of the first to join the new Special Commando units at the start of the War in 1939 and he was in command of one of those units throughout the War. Perhaps his most memorable event was on D-Day in 1944 when he led his unit at Sword Beach, wading ashore armed with an old Winchester rifle, a rolled umbrella and following his personal piper. These scenes were subsequently re-enacted in the film 'The Longest Day'.

Every family has individuals of differing qualities and abilities—it is that which makes the human personality so interesting.