

CHAPTER 2

THE WARRIORS: THE HIGHLAND ARMY

The Highlands of Scotland are a large tract of mountainous terrain north of Glasgow and the Forth of Tay. The Highlands make up nearly half the land area of Scotland, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contained only one-eighth of the population or a little more than six hundred thousand.¹ The land is mountainous, inhospitable, and desolate. Narrow river valleys and lakes are interspersed between the rugged peaks. The terrain and soil lent itself more to cattle herding than to farming; thus, cattle were the primary business and food source for the Highlanders. The climate of the Highlands is a harsh one, consisting of heavy rainfall and frequent storms throughout a good part of the year.²

Because of the fierce climate and unforgiving terrain, few people resided in the Highlands unless of course they were born there, or they wanted to raise cattle there since the land was well suited for that purpose. There were very few towns, virtually no commerce, and no manufacturing in the Highlands.³ Small sod houses with thatched roofs were scattered about the valleys. These were the Highlanders' winter quarters, for in the summer they drove their cattle and flocks into the mountains where they lived in huts called shoelings.⁴ While in the mountains, they would begin storing food for the winter, making cheese from the milk, and taking blood from their cattle which they would

¹John Home, History of the Late Rebellion in the Year 1745 (London: A. Strahan, 1802), 3. Frank McLynn, The Jacobites (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 46.

²Ibid., 5.

³Ibid., 5.

⁴Charles Sanford Terry The Rising of 1745: With a Bibliography of Jacobite History 1689-1788, "Memorandum of Lord President Forbes (1746)" (London: David Nutt, 1903), 2.

boil in salt, then allow to solidify and use as food throughout the year.⁵ There was very little agriculture in the Highlands, the main source of food came from their cattle; therefore, since hunger was common in the region, the Highlanders used everything they could obtain from the cattle. Thus the Highlanders were accustomed to difficult terrain, a harsh climate, and sparse living conditions, all of which greatly contributed to their hardiness in war and generated a great deal of pride on their part for being able to endure such hardships.

The geography of the land was such that it lent itself to the division of the Highlands into distinct, individualized regions, each occupied by a different clan and ruled by the chief of that clan. The term "clan" is Gaelic for children, which was the essence of the clan system.⁶ Clan organization was a central feature of the Celts, and was brought over from Ireland to Scotland around the sixth century A.D. by the Scots, to whom Scotland owes her name. The Scots and the Picts, who may have had a similar organization, intermingled to create the Scottish race.⁷ The clan was a patriarchal, social, political, and military institution. The chief was head of the clan, and his surname was the clan's name; he served as the protector, judge, leader, and administrator for the clan. In essence the chief was the father of the clan.⁸ There were no distinct class divisions among the clan members because the clan was essentially a family.

The members of the clan were bound by both blood and feudal ties. During the Middle Ages the clan was composed of blood relations, but by the sixteenth century the weaker clans had been absorbed by the stronger ones and the clan bond was based

⁵Home, 6.

⁶Frank Adam, The Clans, Septs, and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands, 8th ed., (Edinburgh: Johnston and Bacon, 1975), 95.

⁷Ibid., 95.

⁸Ibid., 108.

somewhat more on a strong feudal bond, by which the chief who owned the land granted individual tracts in exchange for the members' allegiance and military service.⁹ By the time of the Jacobite Rebellions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the feudal clan bond was firmly in place and not easily broken.¹⁰ John Home, who wrote a contemporary history of the last Jacobite Rebellion in 1745-6, described the devotion of the clansmen to their chief. In one family history he found the account of a clansman who placed himself between a musket and his chief, receiving the shot meant for his chief. A Lowland Scot expressed his admiration for this action, and a Highland gentleman replied:

He saw no reason to admire the action so much, that the man did his duty, and nomore; for he was a villain and a coward who, in the same circumstances, would not do the same.¹¹

This example shows the deep devotion the clansmen had to their chiefs, and no one in the Highlands did not owe allegiance to a clan chief.

The weaker clans that had been absorbed still had a clan leader called a chieftain, but their ultimate allegiance rested with the chief. The chief could be appointed by the previous chief but was usually hereditary, and he was expected to act constitutionally, or in keeping with each clan's traditions and customs and in conjunction with the clan council consisting of the heads of the families in the clan.¹² The chief settled all disputes within the clan; he dealt out punishments, regulated the clan's affairs, and was its

⁹James Michael Hill, Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishing, 1986), 14.

¹⁰By the eighteenth century there were thirty-three major clans in the Highlands. Allardyce, 168-176.

¹¹Home, 9.

¹²Adam, 108.

undisputed military leader.¹³

A patriarchal system of government, individual to each clan, based upon tradition and the rule of the chief, and steeped in military auspices, developed in the Highlands. This system left little room for the intervention of the English king and his laws. Each clan and its land was under a different set of customs and traditions. The clan chief was the highest authority in the land, and it was considered treachery to appeal the chief's decision to the king's court for a dispute between clansmen.¹⁴ The crown attempted to impose its law on the Highlands, but it often resulted in bloodshed. If the crown attempted to arrest a clansman, the other members of the clan would come to his aid.¹⁵ The crown was forced to deal with the individual clans and it eventually put the jurisdiction of the Highlands in the hands of the most powerful clans, the result being increased bloodshed.¹⁶ As one contemporary observed, "beyond the territories of each clan, the sword was the arbiter of all disputes."¹⁷

Because of the lack of a uniform legal system and various disputes among the clans, a continual state of warfare developed in the Highlands. The quarrels of individuals would often evolve into clan quarrels; cattle raids were perpetual and honed the stealth skills of the Highlander; and the recurrent attacks by the Romans, the Normans, and the English established a tradition of warfare against outsiders in the Highlands. Thus a great part of clan life was steeped in warfare, and the Highlanders were seasoned veterans in the art of war.

Therefore, it is important to look at the Highlanders' armament and style of

¹³Home, 8.

¹⁴Ibid., 8.

¹⁵Terry, 3.

¹⁶Ibid., 3.

¹⁷Home, 9.

warfare. The Highlanders did not wear armour because it was ill-suited for the terrain and it was encumbering, the only exceptions to this were a few wealthy Highlanders who wore some armour. For the most part, the Highlanders wore their traditional garb in battle. They often wore a light woolen shirt and a thick cloth jacket over which they wore a light woolen skirt, six yards by two yards called a plaid or kilt. This was wrapped loosely around the body and fastened by a brooch on the left shoulder and a belt around the waist, the kilt hanging down to their knees.¹⁸ The plaid also served as bedding and covering when away from shelter or on a campaign.¹⁹ Since the plaid did not cover the right arm it provided no restriction of movement, which was very important during battle. Finally, the Highlanders wore stockings which were tied under their knees, a goat or badger skin purse, and on occasion a bonnet.²⁰ However, during the actual engagements of 1715 and 1745-6, the Highlanders wore nothing but their plaids, thus their movements were less restricted during battle.

The Highlanders' dress was well suited for warfare. Their movements were unencumbered by their dress which was an essential element for the use of their primary weapon, the broadsword, and this contributed to their swiftness of foot. The kilt was also well suited for the hilly terrain of the Highlands as they climbed over the craggy mountains. Their dress was light and was utilized with the greatest efficiency as it substituted for bedding and covering, thus reducing the amount of gear the Highlanders needed to carry with them on campaign. As Colonel David Stewart wrote in a history of the Highlands and their regiments:

The almost incredible swiftness of these people, owing in a great measure, no

¹⁸John Dalrymple, "Characteristic Traits of the Ancient Scots Highlanders," Scots Magazine, 58 (July 1796): 460. David Stewart, Sketches of the Character, Manners, and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1977), 77.

¹⁹Dalrymple, 460.

²⁰Stewart, 78.

doubt, to the lightness of their dress, by which their movements were totally unencumbered, constituted the military advantage of the garb.²¹

Hence the Highland dress played an important role in the effectiveness of the Highland warrior.

The Highland dress was not complete without its weaponry, most of which were carried in peacetime as well as in war, and they often used the same weapons they carried for dress in battle. The Highlanders' weapons had changed very little over the centuries. Their primary weapons were the shield and sword, as it had been when the Romans fought the Celts in the first century A.D.²² The weapons of the Highlander included the broadsword, the dirk, and the target. The target or targe was a circular shield made of bronze, or two layers of wood pegged together and covered in leather.²³ The back was padded with leather to protect the defenders' arm, and had either two arm straps or an arm strap and a hand grip to provide the Highlander with a good firm hold on the target.²⁴ The average size of the target was nineteen to twenty inches in diameter, and its surface was often studded with nail heads, sometimes arranged in circular patterns.²⁵ It was carried on the left arm, and used as a defense against axes, pikes, and in the eighteenth century against the bayonet.

The Scottish dirk or sgian dubh was a dagger worn in the top of the right side Highland stocking. The blades were often singled edged, the other side was similar to a

²¹Ibid., 75.

²²Tacitus, Complete Works of Tacitus, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), 698.

²³David N. Mackay, Clan Warfare in the Scottish Highlands (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1922), 31. John Telfer Dunbar, History of Highland Dress (London: B.T. Batsford, 1979), 204.

²⁴Dunbar, 204.

²⁵Ibid., 204.

saw blade. This made the dirk both a weapon and a tool. The dirks were very plainly decorated and usually had a flat pommel so that it would lay flat against the leg; many of the surviving dirks from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were made from cut-down sword blades.²⁶ This weapon was used in battle only when the main weapon, the broadsword, was lost.

The broadsword was the primary weapon of the Highland warrior. From 1300 through the 1620's, the Scots used a two-handed sword called a "claymore," which had a broad blade and required two hands and a great deal of strength to wield.²⁷ However, this was not the sword used by the Highlanders during the Jacobite Rebellions; the broadsword used during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was often mistakenly called a claymore.²⁸ The broadsword, Scottish sword, Irish sword, or Highland hilt, was developed in the early seventeenth century and based upon an English model.²⁹ The broadsword contained a basket hilt of intricate design, often lined in velvet, deerskin, or leather, and edged with braid. By the end of the sixteenth century, the basket-hilt design was associated with the Highland Scots and Irish as it was a popular choice of the Celtic descendants.³⁰ The blades were broad, double-edged, and oxidized.³¹ Many of the swords were made in Germany and exported to Scotland; they were often engraved with

²⁶Ewart Oakshott, European Weapons and Armour: From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1980), 233.

²⁷Oakshott, 147. Charles Henry Ashdown, European Arms and Armour (New York: Brussel and Brussel, 1967), 336.

²⁸Ashdown, 337.

²⁹Oakshott, 170.

³⁰Ibid., 176-181.

³¹The swords were oxidized or browned to prevent the iron blades from rusting, which was a preventative measure considering the climate of the Highlands. Ibid., 178, 181.

Scottish nationalistic sayings such as "God Protect the Honest Scots" or "Prosperity to Schotland[sic]and No Union."³² The broadsword was girded on the left side, and like the dirk, some of the swords were fitted with old blades.³³

The broadsword was a fierce weapon as described in the following passage:

The horrific wounds of the dead and living--smashed skulls, chopped-off arms, bodies split from shoulder to entrails--showed that the broadsword was the clans' most effective weapon.³⁴

Thus the broadsword was a very effective weapon; it did great damage to the enemy, and unlike a firearm which had to be reloaded, it could be in continuous use. In addition most Highlanders had used this weapon from an early age and wielded it with uncommon skill.

Although the broadsword was the traditional weapon, the Highlanders were acquainted with advancements in weaponry and often made use of them. They also carried two flintlock pistols commonly referred to as "Highland" pistols.³⁵ These were made of steel, and sometimes even brass; they were about .55 caliber and measured approximately one foot in length.³⁶ The pistols had no sights, since they were used in close combat, the Highlanders' favorite style of warfare.³⁷ The Highland pistols were highly ornamented; they were often engraved, or had silver inlaid ornaments especially Celtic designs, others had plaques or panels with the owner's monogram or coat of arms

³²Ibid., 178.

³³Stewart, 69. Oakshott, 179.

³⁴Paul Hopkins, Glencoe and the End of the Highland War (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1986), 160.

³⁵The pistol was named for the people who carried it rather than where it was first made, although many were made in the Lowlands of Scotland and in England. Harold L. Peterson and Robert Elman, The Great Guns (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), 112.

³⁶Ibid., 113.

³⁷Ibid., 113.

on it.³⁸

The trigger was knob shaped and did not have a guard surrounding it. The stock of the gun ended with a scroll or ram's horn curving inward toward the stock, and in between them was a knob matching the trigger knob. The knob usually screwed into the stock and served as a pricker for cleaning the flash hole in the flintlock. One final distinctive characteristic of the Highland pistol was the long flat belt hook on one side of the stock used to hang the pistols from the Highlander's belt.³⁹

The Highlanders also carried a flintlock musket, the "Brown Bess," which was the primary arm of the British army and will be discussed in the next chapter. The Highlanders often could not afford a musket, and usually obtained their arms from overrun British forces. Firearms were not the primary weapons of the Highlanders, but the necessity of the times led them to carry firearms. Thus the Highlanders did have modern weaponry but their tactics and the way that they combined the projectile weapons and blade weapons would set the Highlanders apart from the other armies of the time.

Celtic armies are often described as large, disorganized, undisciplined bodies of troops; however this was not entirely the case with Highland armies.⁴⁰ The Highlanders were drawn up in regiments, more precisely, clan regiments. Each clan regiment was composed of one single clan and was commanded by their chief or his nearest kin.⁴¹ The chief was a colonel to the head of the clan forces, and under the chiefs were two captains, two lieutenants, and two ensigns.⁴² Each member of the clan had a precise position in battle formation, which was usually based upon relation; brother stood beside brother,

³⁸Ibid., 112.

³⁹Ibid., 108-109.

⁴⁰Hill, Celtic Warfare, 2.

⁴¹Home, 138.

⁴²Adam, 119.

and father beside son.⁴³ The chief's position was in the center of the regiment with the clan colors, and each company of the regiment would pick two of their best men to guard the chief, these two men were related, they were often brothers or cousins.⁴⁴ The front ranks of the regiments were made up of the gentlemen of the clans, simply because they were the best equipped men.⁴⁵ Thus, there was some amount of organization to the Highland army.

Although the Highlanders were equipped primarily with antiquated weapons, they lacked organization and training, and they were considered uncivilized by most of Europe; they were some of the hardest and most ferocious men, sought after all over Europe for their mercenary services. They were also the same men who would pose a serious threat to peace in Great Britain, and would even invade northern England in 1745. With the nature of their warfare, the type of weapons they used, and their way of life, the Highlander was more befitting the title of warrior than soldier.

⁴³Ibid., 119.

⁴⁴Home, 138.

⁴⁵Adam, 119.