

CHAPTER 5
THE REBELLIONS OF 1689 AND 1715:
KILLIECRANKIE TO SHERIFFMUIR

The Highland Charge made its first major appearance against a professional English force in the summer of 1689 shortly after the accession of William and Mary of Orange to the throne of England and Scotland. It was no coincidence that the Highland Charge appeared at this time. The Highland Clans were less than enthusiastic about the dethronement of James II in favor of William and Mary of Orange. This was due in part to the Lowland Presbyterian Scots' overwhelming support of William and Mary, thus producing a backlash from the Highland Catholic clans.¹ The Stuart dynasty had ruled in Scotland for three centuries and in England for nearly ninety years; loyalty was an integral part of the clan system as was tradition; thus, to support William was in itself an act of treason to the clan. To further inflame James' supporters, on April 11, 1689, the Scottish convention drew up the Claim of Right, which stated that James II's actions while king were unconstitutional and illegal and therefore through his actions he effectively abdicated the throne; now the way was cleared for William and Mary of Orange to take the Scottish throne.² One prominent Scotsman, John Graham of Claverhouse, first Viscount Dundee, was asked to join the convention but refused to abandon his king; he quickly began raising Highland troops loyal to King James.³ The supporters of James became known as Jacobites, from the Latin *Jacobus* for James, thus beginning the first Jacobite rebellion and an era of military glory for the Highland clans against the English Army.

¹Messenger, 22.

²Reid, Killiecrankie, 3.

³Ibid., 3.

After Dundee left the convention in April, he began collecting loyal clansmen from the Highlands.⁴ Dundee assembled approximately four thousand Highlanders to oppose the English forces, but they waited to engage the enemy hoping that James would land in Scotland with ammunition and Irish reinforcements.⁵ By July, the English assumed the Highlanders had disbanded and fled into the mountains, and if this was true, it was unlikely that they would unite and fight. Therefore, the English recalled their regiments in Scotland.⁶ By late July, Dundee decided to make a stand since the reinforcements still had not arrived. Dundee had served in the Dutch, French, and English armies, thus he was accustomed to a more regimented style of warfare.⁷ However, he was convinced by the Highland chiefs to allow the Highlanders to fight in their traditional manner, which was the offensive charge (recently developed into what is known as the Highland Charge) and then to fight hand to hand.⁸ Dundee insisted upon leading the charge himself, which struck fear into the hearts of the supporters of James.

The clans. . . told his lordship their method of fighting was quite different from that of regular troops; [and] again desired him to consider, that if he should be killed, King James' interest would be lost in Scotland; but no argument could dissuade him from engaging at the head of his troops.⁹

The decision was made and plans for the coming battle were devised.

⁴Although not all clans participated in the Jacobite Rebellions or supported Jacobite views, the majority of clansmen did. Some notable exceptions were the Cambells, Monroes, and Sutherlands, but even some of their clansmen fought for the Jacobites.

⁵Lang, 249.

⁶Hopkins, 149.

⁷Kenyon, 156. "Graham of Claverhouse"

⁸Lang, 249.

⁹Henry Jenner, ed., Memoirs of Viscount Dundee: The Highland Clans and the Massacre of Glencoe (London: F.E. Robinson and Company, 1903), 19.

On July 27, Dundee learned that the English forces led by General MacKay were nearby. Dundee decided to make a stand at the narrow, muddy Pass of Killiecrankie and took up a position that would put the Highland forces approximately three hundred to four hundred feet on the right of MacKay's forces when he entered the pass.¹⁰ This placed the Highlanders in a favorable position to use the Highland Charge since they would be running downhill, which would give impetus to the charge and have a psychological effect on the enemy. When MacKay entered the pass, he realized the danger, advanced his troops up the hillside, and positioned them on a small plateau. MacKay, fearing he would be outflanked on his right, lengthened his line by placing the majority of his men only three ranks deep.¹¹ In response to MacKay's formation and his numerical superiority, twice that of the Highlanders, Dundee formed his men according to clan into column-like arrangements, leaving gaps between the clans.¹² Both armies were in position for battle, but the Highlanders did not attack; MacKay could not attack since the Highlanders had the high ground. Dundee was waiting for sunset so that the sun would not be in his troops' eyes, but he made good use of this time by playing on the English fear of the Highland warrior and enhancing this fear through the characteristic Highland howl.¹³

As the sun set, Dundee gave the order to charge. The Highlanders fell upon MacKay's line, and received three volleys from the English before encountering the enemy line.¹⁴ The Highlanders fired their weapons, threw them to the ground, and rushed toward the enemy sword in hand. The battle was quick and decisive as the

¹⁰Hill, Celtic Warfare, 67.

¹¹Lang, 250.

¹²Hill, Celtic Warfare, 69; Jenner, 19.

¹³Hill, Celtic Warfare, 71, 72.

¹⁴Jenner, 19.

Highlanders met the English soldiers who were ill-equipped to fight hand-to-hand with the sword-bearing Highlanders. The English were outfitted with plug bayonets, but were unable to fire their weapons and fix their bayonets before the Highlanders were upon them. The charge sent most of the regiments into an immediate retreat.¹⁵ An eyewitness described the brief engagement and ensuing carnage:

The Highlanders threw away their plads, haversacks, and all other utensils and marched resolutely and deliberately in their shirts and doublets, with their fusils, swords, targets, and pistols ready, down the hill on the enemy, and received MacKay's third fire, before they pierced his line, in which many of the Highlanders fell, particularly the Lord Viscount Dundee, their general; the terror of the Whigs, the supporter of King James, and the glory of Scotland. Then the Highlanders fired, threw down their fusils, rushed in upon the enemy, with sword, target, and pistol, who did not maintain their ground two minutes after the Highlanders were amongst them; and I dare to be bold to say, there were scarce ever such strokes given in Europe, as were given that day by the highlanders. Many of General MacKay's officers and soldiers were cut down through the skull and neck, to the very breasts; others had skulls cut off above their ears like night caps; some soldiers had both their bodies and cross belts cut through at one blow; pikes and small swords were cut like willows..."¹⁶

The Highlanders were outnumbered nearly two to one, but the speed, simplicity, and absolute horror of the Highland Charge carried the day. The English and Highland losses were quite heavy, with over two thousand Englishmen killed or captured, while the Highlanders lost nearly nine hundred men.¹⁷

Although a victory for the Highlanders and a devastating loss for the English, the death of Dundee would end this brief glory for the Jacobite cause in 1689. The success of the Highland Charge against a professional army and seasoned veterans, as part of the English forces had seen action on the continent, had been proven. Now the Highlanders

¹⁵Keltie, 372.

¹⁶Jenner, 20.

¹⁷Richard Kane, Campaigns of King William and Queen Anne: From 1689-1712, Also a New System of Military Discipline (London: Millan, 1745), 13.

knew victory was within their grasp and the military technology of the English army at this time, was no match for the brute strength and raw courage of the Highland host. However, without the leadership of Dundee, the Jacobite cause and military endeavors faltered and became dormant.

The Highland Charge was successful in this battle for several reasons. As Hill stated, it was Dundee's pre-battle arrangements that made the Highland Charge more effective than usual.¹⁸ When Dundee set the Highlanders on high ground, it increased the speed of the charge and the fierceness of the Highlanders as they descended upon the English soldiers. The charge is also a simple maneuver that does not require a great deal of training or skill. The Highlanders were not trained soldiers, nor did they have the luxury of time to attempt any type of mass training. The charge was the traditional Gaelic style of warfare, and the clansmen were well acquainted with how it worked and what it required. The Highlanders always carried their weapons and knew how to use them effectively. Accordingly, the Highland Charge was the obvious tactic. In addition, the Highlanders were for the most part not a wealthy group and staging a rebellion did not readily bring in financial resources, thus the cost of the Highland Charge was a factor in the type of warfare waged against the English. The Highland Charge was cheap; the Highlanders already possessed most of the weaponry required. The best choice to enable the Highland host to achieve victory was the Highland Charge, even though the Highland tradition which insisted that the commander lead the charge, led to the death of the 1689 Rebellion's greatest leader.

Despite the lack of leadership and the subsequent military failures of the Jacobite cause, King William and his advisors were wary of the Highland clans. At first the government attempted to buy the Highlanders' loyalty, and although some took the

¹⁸Hill, Celtic Warfare, 75.

money, their loyalty was not swayed.¹⁹ Then the government required the clan chiefs to take an oath of allegiance to King William and threatened the use of military “persuasion” if they refused. When the MacDonalds of Glencoe failed to take the oath, King William sent government forces to make an example of them. A regiment was sent to Glencoe and claimed that they came as friends and would not hurt anyone there; the clans “gave them a welcome reception, and entertain’d them as friends in the most hospitable manner 15 days.”²⁰ On the twelfth of February, 1692, a letter from the King was sent to the commander, which stated:

Sir, You are hereby ordered to fall on the Rebels, the McDonalds of Glencoe, and put all to the sword under 70. You are to have special care that the old fox and his cubs do not escape: secure the avenues that no one gets off. This you are to put to execution at 5 in the morning precisely...this is by the King’s special command, for the good and safety of the country, that these miscreants be cut off, root and branch.²¹

On February 13, 1692, a company of government troops carried out what came to be known as the Glencoe Massacre, killing the very people who had allowed them to stay in their homes the night before.²² Although the massacre quelled some of the unrest in the Highlands, it also produced feelings of resentment for years to come.

To further add to the flames of indignation, the Scottish Parliament accepted the Act of Union in 1707, which united Scotland and England under a single government. The Jacobites did not support Scotland’s loss of sovereignty, but economic concerns took over when England threatened to increase trade prices. The Scottish Parliament met for the last time in 1707 when the Act of Union was signed into law, creating the Kingdom

142. ¹⁹Fitzroy Maclean, Scotland: A Concise History (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998),

²⁰Kane, 16.

²¹Ibid., 16.

²²Ibid., 16.

of Great Britain.²³ The Highlands were particularly distressed by the passage of the act, because they had very little representation in the Scottish Parliament.²⁴ As part of the Union, Scotland was allowed to keep its legal system and was not required to participate in the Anglican Church. However, the Scottish Parliament would exist no more, but Scotland was given representation in the English Parliament. Scotland was also required to take over part of the national debt of England, but was paid a handsome sum, known as the “Equivalent,” in part for accepting the debt.²⁵ Needless to say, many Scots, and particularly the Highlanders, were greatly distressed by the Act of Union. To make matters even worse, in 1714 Queen Anne died without an heir and George I, Elector of Hanover in Germany, took the throne, which enraged the Highlanders and Jacobites. George I had very little interest in ruling the British, and did not even bother to learn the English language. The Jacobites had pushed for the exiled James Edward Stuart to ascend the throne, but the 1701 Act of Settlement provided that if William III or his successor died without an heir, the throne would go to the House of Hanover, which could trace its descent back to James VI and I.²⁶ So, when George I took the throne, the Jacobites rebelled once again.

During the 1715 Rebellion, the Highland Charge made one major appearance at the battle of Sheriffmuir. The Earl of Mar, who had served as Queen Anne’s Secretary of State, was disappointed in the new king and dismissed from office; he returned to Scotland where he found others with similar feelings of displeasure, formed a War Council, and, as their new commander, began preparations for the Rebellion.²⁷ In

²³Maclean, 152, 155.

²⁴Nigel Tranter, Rob Roy MacGregor (Glasgow: Niel Wilson, 1995), 78.

²⁵Maclean, 152.

²⁶Ibid., 151.

²⁷John Shearer, Sheriffmuir (Sterling: Eneas Mackay, 1898), 17-18.

September of 1715, the standard of James VIII, also known as the “Old Pretender,” was raised in Scotland.²⁸ At the time, the only real forces in Scotland were irregular and militia forces that were in place simply to prevent small Jacobite risings in their areas.²⁹ The Earl of Mar was awaiting help from France, but Louis XIV died just prior to the raising of the standard and the French government was now unwilling to send aid.³⁰ Therefore, the Earl of Mar did not fully engage the British forces until November.

By November 1715, the Duke of Argyle had been placed in charge of the British forces, which consisted primarily of militia units and some veteran troops, and the two armies were poised for battle on the ground of Sheriffmuir. Both commanders gave the order to begin the battle without actually seeing the other’s forces. When the two armies came in sight of each other, the commanders decided in the final moments to reorganize their lines, and when seeing the other reorganizing, each tried to reposition their forces yet again. The Highlanders took up a position on a slope on the right, in preparation to make the charge. The Highland Charge began at noon when the Highlanders fired two volleys and then began their furious rush into the Duke of Argyle’s left wing. Within minutes, the British left wing broke and the Highlanders pursued the enemy.³¹ The Highlanders’ victory and subsequent pursuit of the British left wing was so furious that they neglected to check on their own left wing which was broken and sent into retreat.³² Mar reported that he did not know what had happened to his left wing, as he was leading the right wing; he eventually regrouped his wing and returned to the battlefield but to no

²⁸Ibid., 19.

²⁹Tranter, 125.

³⁰Shearer, Sheriffmuir, 19.

³¹Shearer, Sheriffmuir, 29-33.

³²Hill, Celtic Warfare, 90-3.

avail.³³ Thus Sheriffmuir was neither a victory or a defeat for either side, since the left of both armies was lost and the right was victorious.

The Highland Charge was once again successful. At least a portion of the British left were veterans of continental warfare under the Duke of Marlborough, and they were equipped with the new ring bayonet.³⁴ Again the Highland Charge was successful against disciplined, experienced, and better equipped soldiers. The strength of the Highland Charge was exhibited in the massive force of the impact against the enemy lines and in its ability to defeat the bayonet. Hill reports, that the “Gaels dropped to the ground to avoid the fire” of the British troops.³⁵ Again a simple idea saved the Highlanders from additional casualties, and although lying on the ground to avoid gunfire seemed like common sense, many troops during this time stood their ground as they exchanged fire with the opposing force. The greatest weakness of the Highland Charge was the lack of leadership and discipline after the charge began. The right wing after the charge lacked the leadership and discipline to reorganize themselves to reinforce the left wing. Without this ability the Highlanders would not be able to effectively wage a lengthy war. Although the Highland Charge did have the capability of producing victories, it could not continue to be effective if the force could not regroup and reinforce portions of the battlefield that were in danger of breaking. The ensuing melee that resulted after the charge was carried out, and the Highlanders consummate appetite for booty, prevented any type of reorganization simply because of the lack of discipline after the Highlanders engaged the enemy lines. Had the Highlanders reorganized and prevented the fall of their left wing at Sheriffmuir, the British forces might have been defeated. Given the

³³From a letter the Earl of Mar wrote to Colonel Balfour dated November 13, 1715. Katherine Thomson, Memoirs of the Jacobites of 1715 and 1745 Vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley, 1845), 110.

³⁴Hill, Celtic Warfare, 90.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 90.

disappointment in King George I, a Jacobite rout of the British forces at Sheriffmuir could have changed the fortunes for the “Old Pretender” James Edward Stuart, or James VIII.

To further provoke the Highlanders, the British imposed the Disarming Acts in 1716 and 1725, which called for the confiscation of all weapons in the Highlands. In 1724 General George Wade was sent into the Highlands to report on the state of affairs there to the King. In his report, Wade stated that the Highlanders’ “notion of virtue and vice are very different from the more civilized part of mankind.”³⁶ This is a good example of the English view of the Highlander as an uncivilized member of their society. With an attitude like this, is it any wonder that the Highlanders despised the English and the Lowland Scot who shared similar opinions of the Highlanders? Wade also reported that the Disarming Act of 1716 had been ineffectual and that the “clans most disaffected to your Majesty’s government remain better armed than ever...”³⁷ He also reported that “great quantities of broken and useless arms” were being delivered to the British authorities.³⁸ General Wade’s recommendations included, “that an Act of Parliam[ent] be procured effectually to punish the Highlanders inhabiting the most uncivilized parts of the country, who carry or conceal in their dwellings, or other places, arms contrary to law...”³⁹ For the Highlanders, carrying a weapon, particularly a sword and pistol, was simply part of who they were, and to take this from them was an insult to their traditions and way of life. Opinions such as the English held for the Highlanders and the Disarming Acts only perpetuated Jacobite sentiments which would once again erupt into an insurrection.

³⁶Allardyce, vol. 1, 132.

³⁷Ibid., 136.

³⁸Ibid., 136.

³⁹Ibid., 142.

In 1740, the Jacobites once again had the chance to mount a rebellion as Britain engulfed herself in the War of Austrian Succession against her perpetual enemy France. Only five years after the debacle of the 1715 Rebellion, the “Old Pretender” had a son, Charles Edward Stuart, also known as “Bonny Prince Charlie.” Charles would breathe new life into the Jacobite cause with his vigor, spirit, ambition, and charisma. With the promise of French assistance, Charles left his father in Rome and set out incognito for France in January 1744.⁴⁰ The French plan was to launch a naval invasion of Great Britain from the port of Dunkirk in northern France. However, like several attempted invasions of Britain in the past, soon after the main convoy of ships set sail a violent storm blew in and wrecked many of the ships; this was the last substantial French contribution to Charles’s efforts to restore the crown to the Stuart line.⁴¹ From that point on the French simply encouraged Charles to continue his efforts and supplied some money and arms, but their main goal was to distract England with as little effort on their own part as possible. In March of 1744 war was officially opened between France and England. Charles was undaunted in his efforts to raise a rebellion for the House of Stuart and declared that “he would certainly be in Scotland next summer whither the King of France assisted him or not.”⁴² When news of Charles’s impending landing reached Scotland, it was met with alarm and many tried to convince the Prince that this was a fool-hearty adventure. Nevertheless, in June 1745, Charles left France for Scotland, bringing with him money, a thousand guns, and eighteen hundred broadswords.

In July 1745, Charles landed on the Isle of Eriskay in western Scotland; by

⁴⁰Maclean, 169.

⁴¹David Elcho, A Short Account of the Affairs in Scotland in 1744, 1745, 1746, ed. (London: Mercat Press, 1973), 231.

⁴²Ibid., 235.

August 19, he had set his standard up at Glenfinan.⁴³ Despite their initial hesitation, Highland clansmen and other Jacobite supports began to rally around Charles. By September, Charles and his forces had taken Edinburgh, seized its arms, and continued to march south toward England. The rebellion was in full swing and soon the first major battle and the appearance of the Highland Charge would test the few remaining British forces outside of the town of Preston-pans.

The Highland Charge had been successful in the previous rebellions and now the Jacobites had their Prince with them. Once more the Jacobites would create turmoil in the British kingdom. Would this be the “Year of Charlie” in which the Highland Charge would carry the Jacobites to victory?

⁴³Ibid., 236-243.