

The Battle of Glen Fruin

Are there any Colquhouns in the audience today? Any Campbells? If so, I forgive you, and I ask your forgiveness in return for in the tale I tell today my forefathers and yours shed much blood.

On the chilly morning of the 7th of February, in the year of our Lord 1603, Sir Alexander Colquhoun, Chief of Clan Colquhoun and Laird of Luss, rode into the broad bottom lands of Glen Fruin at the south end of Loch Lomond at the head of a small army. And he carried with him Letters of Fire and Sword; a license to kill MacGregors.

Colquhouns and MacGregors, MacFarlanes and Campbells, Buchanans and MacIntoshes had jostled in that corner of Scotland for generations, borrowing one another's cattle. But hostilities began to escalate in the autumn of 1602 when two young MacGregors were benighted in Colquhoun lands and asked for sup and shelter. They were denied, against the traditional laws of hospitality, and thinking themselves ill-used, they sought shelter in an empty byre, built a fire, killed a sheep, and had roast mutton for supper. In the morning they were apprehended and taken to the laird, who had them summarily hanged. In retaliation, the MacGregors raided Colquhoun lands in Glen Finlas, burning several farms, driving off much cattle, and killing a few defenders.

On the advice of Archibald Campbell, 7th Earl of Argyll, Alexander Colquhoun took a bevy of women to Stirling and paraded them before King James VI. Each woman was mounted upon a white palfrey and was said to be made a widow by the depredations of the wicked MacGregors. Each held aloft a man's shirt, slashed and dyed with blood. Sheep's blood was used to give a more uniform and copious presentation. As it was well known King Jamie was horrified at the sight of blood, there's no surprise he issued Letters of Fire and Sword post haste. The Laird of Luss returned home with royal permission not just to raid, but to make war.

But Archibald the Grim was not yet through meddling. He arranged for a parley between Alexander Colquhoun and Alasdair of Glenstrae, the MacGregor chief. To preserve the dignity and safety of these two chiefs, it was agreed that each could bring an honor guard of one hundred men to the "peace conference." They were to meet in Glen Fruin.

Now trust is a fine and noble sentiment, but prudence makes for a long life. Alasdair MacGregor brought an extra hundred men with him; some accounts say as many as three. Alexander Colquhoun, on the other hand, brought at least four hundred men, some accounts say as many as eight. Whatever the numbers, all accounts agree the MacGregors were outnumbered at least two to one.

The Gregarach entered the head of the glen by coming over the divide from Loch Long. Alasdair MacGregor led his allotted hundred down the burn, leaving the remainder hidden in the woods and commanded by his brother Iain Dubh. The Colquhoun force, including a cavalry contingent, came up the glen from downstream. Leaving his cavalry and all but his honor guard hidden in the willows in the bottom land, Alexander Colquhoun marched up to the rendezvous. It is said that a number of people from as far away as Dumbarton had come as spectators of what they clearly expected to be a battle.

No record exists of what was said by the chiefs, but in the end Alasdair of Glenstrae led his hundred Gregarach back up the glen keeping the burn on his left. Watching his planned war march away, the

Laird of Luss sent his hundred Colquhouns in pursuit. Perhaps he hoped to goad the MacGregors back down into his ambush.

The MacGregors were swift and made it to the head of the glen before battle was joined. Glenstrae reached the cover of the woods and turned at bay, holding the high ground. Jockeying for position and equal elevation, the Colquhouns turned aside, hoping to cross the burn and flank the MacGregors. But Iain Dubh and the hidden MacGregors already held the right bank, and the hundred Colquhouns found themselves caught in the stream bed, surrounded and outnumbered by MacGregors on the high ground, armed with bows. Many Colquhouns were killed.

Abandoning an untenable position, the Colquhouns retreated back down the burn in an effort to rejoin the rest of their force. The Gregarach pursued on both banks, driving the Colquhouns before them. Partway down, the burn twisted through a deep, wooded ravine. The Colquhouns bravely tried to make a stand in the cover, but the MacGregor archers on the high banks reaped a red harvest. Many Colquhouns were killed as the arrows whickered among the trees.

Breaking once again from cover, the surviving Colquhouns made a desperate sprint for Alexander and his waiting cavalry. As for the Laird of Luss, he saw a pitiful remnant of his honor guard fleeing for their lives before far more than the hundred Gregarach he had sent them to pursue. He ordered his cavalry to charge.

Fortune did not favor the Colquhouns that day. The charging cavalry quickly lost its terrible momentum in the soft marshy ground. In a moment the light-footed Gregarach were among them, nimbly dancing circles around the mired horses. Emerging from their ambush, the Colquhoun foot were dismayed to see their proud cavalry being cut to pieces.

It took only a few minutes for the Colquhoun force to lose cohesion and to lose heart. Men began to flee and the battle became a rout. The MacGregors chased the Colquhouns from Glen Fruin. Accounts differ, placing the Colquhoun casualties from 140 to 200 men. The butcher's bill on the MacGregor side was fewer than a dozen. But among that dozen was the chief's brother, Iain Dubh.

The triumphant MacGregors marched home right through the middle of the Colquhoun lands, driving before them all the livestock they could manage to collect. But the great victory of Glen Fruin would bring a sore curse on Clan Gregor. Archibald Campbell was the real victor that day, for at a stroke he had undone two troublesome neighbors. The power of the Colquhouns was broken, and, having the King's ear as he did, it was no hard task to arouse Jamie's wrath against the MacGregors. The King granted the Campbells charters to the MacGregor lands in Glenstrae, and then he outlawed the entire clan; man, woman, and child. He made it illegal to even bear the name MacGregor.

Harried and hunted on every side, denied the protection of law, forbidden even their name, the Gregarach became the Children of the Mist, hiding in their mountain fastnesses or scattered across the British Isles, Europe, and the colonies. Under a hundred different surnames they sought to hide from the wrath of their king. It would be 171 years before the proscription was lifted and the name MacGregor heard openly again in Scotland.

"While there's leaves in the forest and foam on the river, MacGregor, despite them, shall flourish forever!"