

Griogal Cridhe

There's a beautiful old Gaelic song called Griogal Cridhe, or Gregor of the Heart. Some scholars say it's the oldest Gaelic song we know. And even though it's 450 years old, the song is still performed and recorded by most Celtic musicians today. You can find dozens of covers of it on YouTube, Spotify, and the like.

We have a surprising amount of information about a song so old. We know it was composed in 1570 by Marian Campbell MacGregor somewhere in the inner glens between Argyll and the Trossachs. The song survived in the oral tradition of the Western Highlands and the Inner Hebrides until it was finally written down in 1813. The song is a widow's lament for her dead husband, but like so many Gaelic laments, it sounds almost like a lullaby. This is the story of that song.

Around 1550 the chief of Clan Gregor died, leaving an heir who was but a wee lad. Grey Colin Campbell, Laird of Glenorchy, had just managed to acquire a charter of feudal superiority over the lands of Glenstrae, the seat of the Gregor chiefs. Aiming to reduce the MacGregors to the status of feudal tenants rather than an independent clan, he sent the young chief, Gregor Roy, to be fostered with Sir Duncan Campbell of Glen Lyon.

Gregor Roy was a bonny lad with ruddy cheeks and ginger hair. He thrived in his foster father's household, growing strong and tall and handsome. Sir Duncan, himself also called Red, seems to have favored the boy, as his own son was mentally disabled. Red Duncan's wife, however, is said to have hated young Gregor Roy MacGregor.

In his fosterage at Glen Lyon, Gregor acquired all the expected accomplishments of a highland chief: skill at arms, reading and writing, hunting, cattle droving, and the leadership of men. And he acquired one other treasure in the house of Red Duncan the Hospitable, the love of Duncan's lovely, dark-haired daughter, Marian Campbell.

In 1560, Gregor Roy came of age and applied to Grey Colin to confirm him in his holding of Glenstrae. Grey Colin refused, revealing the Campbell policy of denying the MacGregors any feudal title that would legitimize their claim to their own lands.

Thus, at a turn, at the beginning of his adult life, Gregor Roy was made landless, facing a writ of eviction or the name of outlaw if he tried to occupy his own ancestral home. So of course, he did what any self-respecting highlander would do. He launched a personal war of retribution on Sir Colin Campbell of Glenorchy, a close kinsman of the girl he loved.

Gregor Roy waged the kind of guerilla warfare the highlanders were masters at. He and his men lifted cattle, burned cots and barns and byres, and terrorized Glenorchy's tenants, thus denying Grey Colin the revenues from his lands. Ironically, many of Glenorchy's tenants were MacGregors who had been forced to sign bonds of manrent during their chief's minority. Now many of those repudiated their bonds and joined their young chief in his depredations.

For ten years Gregor Roy carried out his war, living a hard, martial life on the slopes of the mountains and in the high, hidden glens. He and his men, called the Sons of the Wolf, would swoop down to raid

and leave, then return to the heights to desperately avoid pursuit and retribution. Occasionally Gregor would seek respite and refuge at the house of his foster father in Glen Lyon. Red Duncan, unlike the rest of his Campbell kin, remained neutral in this struggle, perhaps out of regard for his daughter's feelings.

It was during this time that Gregor Roy married Marion Campbell. Some say they eloped. Regardless, it was undoubtedly a hurried affair as Gregor's implacable pursuers were never far away.

Marian loved her gallant young husband desperately, so much that she apparently spent some considerable time with him as a fugitive in the heather. They would ramble together over the shielings and braes, tramping over the high passes and through the low bogs. Each night Gregor would find shelter for his beloved Marian in the straw of a cottar's byre or under an overhanging stone. It was a rough life, but surely there were some idyllic moments for the young couple there amid the gorgeous highland scenery.

But time passes, life will find a way, and the inevitable happened. When Marian knew she was carrying Gregor's child, she returned to her father's house. Gregor would often visit her there. But such visits were dangerous, even in Red Duncan Campbell's territory. Grey Colin's men were relentless in their efforts to lay Gregor Roy by the heels.

It's said that one time they nearly caught Gregor at his father-in-law's house. His mother-in-law had betrayed him and sent word to his Campbell foes. Gregor had to leap from his wife's window and take to the heather as fast as he could. He eluded his pursuers by jumping across a narrow gorge on the River Lyon at a place that is called MacGregor's Leap to this day. Following this episode, Marian and her little son left her father's house again and lived in a cave with her beloved Gregor.

But eventually—invariably, Gregor Roy, Chief of Clan Gregor, was run to ground. His trial was short. Grey Colin of Glenorchy himself was the judge. And Grey Colin himself beheaded the young chief. Marian, clasping her son to her bosom and now eight months pregnant with a second son, was forced to witness the execution. Then she was hastily married off to a safe minor nobleman elsewhere.

And then she composed her lament. In it she reminisced about the tender days with Gregor living in the open. She described the execution, cursed his persecutors, and ended with these piteous words,

"While other men's wives sleep soft in their houses, I lie by your grave, wringing my hands.

Great is my grief! O, great!"

Gregor Roy's two young sons, Alasdair and Iain, grew under the shadow of their father's tragic life, and thirty years later led the Gregarach in the Battle of Glen Fruin wherein a stunning victory was won, and the clan ruined. But that is a story for another day.

Here's a link to a beautiful performance of Griogal Cridhe, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scc-XXZDvdE>