

## The Story of William MacMurchy, Poet, Harp Player, and Piper to the Laird of Largie

The most detailed account of William MacMurchy's life that I came across was in an article written by Keith Sanger for the *The Kintyre Antiquarian and Natural History Society* magazine in June 1983. Sanger believes MacMurchy, clearly another spelling of the name MacMarki, was born around 1700 in or near Campbeltown. He was the eldest of three brothers and likely the William MacMurchy who married Agnes Robertson on 14 March 1728, who gave birth to a daughter Ann on 29 December 1728. It was around this time that he became one of the Laird of Largie's pipers, but he was also described as a noted poet, wire-strung harper as well as a piper.



**A Gaelic Bard Performing for their Clan Chief**

His bardic forebears had been granted substantial tenancies to lands at Laggan and Kerranmore in southern Kintyre by King James IV in 1506 – the first recorded appearance of a MacMarquis/MacMarki in Kintyre – for bardic services. John McMarkisch who received the tenancies in 1506, was described as a ‘carminista’, meaning something like a ‘singer’ or ‘versifier’, and apparently a member of a fairly significant Gaelic bardic family. He was the first of five bards to the MacDonalds of Largie that were associated with Laggan, the last, Domhnall (Donald) Mac Mharcuis, was identified as a Gaelic poet and language expert and apparently employed by the Synod of Argyll between 1697 and 1701, mainly as a translator of religious texts. His one surviving poem is an address to the Synod which has a note at the end where he signs his name “Domhnall Mac Mharcuis gan lagan”.

Donald's predecessor, John Oig McMarcuis (likely his father but through tanistry – see my article on the origins of the Marquis family –

could have been another male relative) seems to have been more of an expert and teacher of the Gaelic language rather than poet or bard. Minutes from a Synod of Argyll of a meeting held in May 1658, declared their dissatisfaction with the translation of some psalms and decided to send two translators with the texts to Campbeltown to seek the advice and help of “Jon McMarques in Kintyr, ane old man and able in the Irish language.” Perhaps another relative carried on the responsibilities of providing musical entertainment within the Largie household, William MacMurchy suggests the tradition continued within the family. As I described in my book, the harp playing bards of the Middle Ages were gradually replaced by Highland bagpipers such as MacMurchy.

Employed not only as poets and bards these highly educated people were able to converse in Scots and Latin as well as Gaelic and took on the roles of civil servants, lawyers and physicians etc.; a not too dissimilar function to that played by Greeks in the Roman World. John Oig McMarcuis, for example, acted as a witness to two significant documents involving Sir James MacDonald, chief of Clan Donald South. The first in 1597, was an important bond between Sir James and Donald MacDuffie, Prior of Oronsay Abbey. In the second, three years later, John Oig witnessed a submission by five members of the MacAlasdair of Loup family to Sir James MacDonald, indicating a person that was held in high esteem and clearly a member of the Argyll MacDonald hierarchy.

As described in Chapter Three of my book titled ‘The Killing Time’, the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a period of endless clan conflict, a civil war, famines and epidemics. Anything from a quarter to two-thirds of the population of Kintyre are estimated to have been killed, starved or migrated as a result. The century ended with a deserted countryside, a major de-population an inevitable consequence of such hellish times – the MacMarquis bardic landholders of Laggan and Kerranmore amongst them.

William MacMurchy and my direct descendant Alexander McMarcus, who became Largie’s tacksman (chief tenant) on Cara, were of the next generation, still tied to the MacDonalds of Largie and still holding important posts within what remained of the clan structure but no longer major landowners. William MacMurchy was renowned enough to have a satire composed about his life by a merchant called Bostain MacCairbe,

where he is described as “a piper, a fiddler, a harper, and schoolmaster as well as a bard, and a man who according to his reviler, was enjoying undeservedly the confidence of the Laird of Largie.”

It is clear from a series of letters, mainly involving younger relatives and the Highland Society, written in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century concerning what must have been a substantial manuscript collection of poems, pipe music and other Gaelic literary pieces not only produced by himself but also collected from other contemporary musicians and poets. One reply in particular dated 20 November 1808 from Duncan Stewart of Glenbuckie, who was by then the Duke of Argyle's Chamberlain in Kintyre, contains the interesting comment "The eldest of them (the McMurchy brothers) William who was a great genius put all the pibroch and many highland airs to music." This would imply that William was one of the earliest notators of Piobaireachd music. If true, this would put MacMurchy amongst the premier pipers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century alongside the likes of the MacCrimmons (the most famous family of professional pipers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century).



“The word ‘piobaireachd’ literally means pipe playing or pipe music but is now used to describe the classical music of the Great Highland Bagpipe. When and where piobaireachd was first invented is impossible to say. It is old, but almost certainly not the oldest form of pipe music as it is a highly developed product. In 1760, it was described by Joseph MacDonald (the earliest writer to publish a study of the music) as being ‘*invented and taught by the first Masters of this instrument, in the islands of Mull and Skye*’. This is certainly a

reference to the famous MacCrimmon family from Skye who were hereditary pipers to the MacLeods of Dunvegan. Several tunes are known to have been composed by the MacCrimmons. Nothing resembling piobaireachd has been discovered in any other country in the world. Also, the Great Highland Bagpipe is the only instrument which can reproduce

piobaireachd satisfactorily to the ear of the devotee.” (from the Piobaireachd Music Society website). MacMurchy's manuscripts are now in the National Library of Scotland.

In my book I describe the duplicitous role played by the MacDonalds of Largie in the Jacobite Rebellion led by Prince Charles Edward Stuart (the Young Pretender) in 1745. It appears that the then Laird of Largie, John MacDonald XI, ended up supporting both sides. The circumstances facing the MacDonalds of Largie in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century were very different to those that pertained in 1645, when they had given full support to the Stuart kings, as they did when James II again pleaded for the Jacobite clans support in 1689-90. The Hanoverian-supporting Campbells were by 1745 in a much stronger position and effectively controlled Argyll, thus posed a real threat to the MacDonalds of Largie – who had somehow managed to survive as the only significant MacDonald presence left on the Kintyre peninsula – if they again rallied to the Jacobite cause, which many of their fellow MacDonalds believed to be the last opportunity to preserve the Gaelic way of life.

The Campbells certainly believed the Largie men would try to join up with the forces of Bonny Prince Charlie on his march to Edinburgh. To do so, the Campbells anticipated that they intended to use the herring fleet at Tarbert as a means of transport. To forestall that possibility, a fleet of ships was sent from Greenock on the Clyde to seize the Tarbert boats. Fearing resistance from the boat-owners, Campbell forces were reinforced in Tarbert by Donald Campbell of Kilchamaig, who was paid five pounds and nine shillings “for subsisting for five days a party of Argyllshire men to reinforce a command of the Earl of Loudon’s regiment...upon the intelligence that Mr MacDonald of Lerggy and other gentlemen were to march with a body of men that way to join the rebel army, which was effectually prevented.” The mystery lies in how it was prevented...

In a 19<sup>th</sup> century version of a Bill Bryson-like travelogue, Cuthbert Bede’s (Rev. Edward Bradley) chronicle of his journey through Kintyre during 1861. Whilst staying at Largie Castle he recounts one traditional tale of events in 1745. In my book I outline the various reasons given for the failure of the march to reach Tarbert and the herring fleet. What was extraordinary about this story is what Cuthbert Bede was told happened next.

Perhaps after being threatened and warned off by the Campbells, according to Bede, the Laird of Largie then actually changed sides and instead of sending his forces to aid Charles Stuart agreed to join the 'Fir Chinntire' (Men of Kintyre), the Campbell-led Argyll Militia fighting for the Hanoverian King George II. Bede quotes a later statement by John Campbell of Mamore who described the arrival of the Largie men at Inveraray: –

*'... MacLeolan [Laird of Largie's piper] struck the air called 'Fir Chinntire' the Duke immediately recognised it, and turning to those near him said 'Come, gentlemen we must go out and welcome the Cantire men.' The duke gave a grand ball to the Cantire men at Inveraray, at which the MacDonald pipers were present. The Duke himself danced a high dance to which MacLeolan was the piper. When the dance was ended, the Duke said to MacLeolan 'You are the sweetest piper I ever heard, and you are the most ill-looking man I ever saw.' MacLeolan replied with a shrewd smile, 'I think it was the same tailor that shaped us both'.'*

I also included the above quote in my book, but what I missed was the significance of the "*MacDonald pipers were present*", i.e., that there was more than one Largie piper in attendance, in fact, there were two. The second piper was William MacMurchy, Bede goes on to tell the part played by MacMurchy in the above "grand ball": –

"On this, the Laird of Largie thought fit to change his mind [about the march on Tarbert and joining the Jacobites], so he sent his men with the rest of the men of Cantire [Campbell-led militia]. Macdonald had two pipers, MacMurchy and MacLeolan, who played alternately. [This is what Bede wrote just before the above quote] 'When they reached Inveraray, MacMurchy played the Campbells are coming, in order to announce their approach. The Duke of Argyll was in company with other gentlemen at the time, and did not take any notice of the tune, but when MacMurchy had finished, and MacLeolan struck up the air called 'Fir Chinntyre' .... For the rest of this quote see above.

This MacMurchy, the piper of Largie, who had been sorely grieved at the Duke of Argyll passing over his playing, was accounted a very excellent poet. But that it did not require any very high powers of reflection, taste, or

imagination, to constitute the poet of a clan, we may judge from the following Cantire legend of him.

A learned gentleman, who was a poet, one day visited Largie in disguise, in order that he might test MacMurphy's powers. The piper received him kindly, and entertained him with some tunes, the while some scones of bread were being toasted at the fire. The learned gentleman and poet either did not consider this as an entertainment or thought it a fit subject for his manufactured verse. So, he jumped up, and making for the door, exclaimed, (or rather declaimed,)

" Piping and raw bread,  
are worse to me than the pangs of death,  
man, who hast dived both my ears,  
may you never get a reward.

" MacMurphy, instead of losing his temper, and answering the stranger in prose that was more hearty than complimentary, dropped the pipe from his mouth, and immediately replied to him in this impromptu verse : —

" Stop, man, and give ear to reason!  
bad is the story that has no foundation.  
My wife is coming back from Chill,  
with a load of butter on her back."

The learned gentleman and poet found that MacMurphy was quite his match as an improvisatore, so he accepted the invitation, and waited till the good wife came home. Then he eats of the buttered bannochs and passed a very agreeable evening with the piper of Largie."

*(Glencreggan, Volume Two, Rev. Edward Bradley, 1861, page 227)*

Perhaps not the most exciting tale to the general reader, but this is the earliest fairly detailed account that provides a little insight into the character and personality of an individual relative of mine who lived 270 years ago, and very few ordinary people have the opportunity to hear directly from an ancestor who lived that long ago.

Bede tells of another episode concerning the men of Largie's involvement with the Argyll Militia. On reaching the site of the Battle of Falkirk too late for the fighting, they found themselves in real danger because the Jacobites had been victorious, so hid in a nearby church. They were then surrounded by Bonny Prince Charlie's troops and threatened

with massacre until the Largie contingent pleaded with their fellow clansmen that they were only there under duress and begged for mercy, which was said to have been granted. The Kintyre men then returned home after a period of imprisonment. Even if some of the Largie men did join the Argyll Militia, John Campbell of Stonefield later reported that others had been "...listed men for the Pretender's service... and fferry'd over from Kintyre to Arran in order to join the Highland army." Presumably, the MacMarcuis family, including the tacksman of Cara, would have been obligated to provide fighting men for his Laird but one can only wonder for which side?

Whatever the reason for the ambiguous response to the '45 Jacobite call to arms it is probably the reason that left the MacDonalds still retaining their Largie Estate, while the other clans who openly supported the 'Bonny Prince' faced devastating repercussions. The final death knell for the Gaelic way of life in the Highlands was well and truly struck on the desolate field at Culloden.

After Culloden, the MacDonalds of Largie, like all the other Jacobite supporting clans, were forced to adapt to a new reality, the traditional clan system was over with hereditary sinecures and wider kinship relationships breaking down. It is probable that the McMarcus tacksmen on Cara's ties to the Laird of Largie lasted longer, in fact until the end of the century, was due to the lucrative whisky smuggling operation.

For hereditary MacDonald-linked pipers such as MacMurchy, their position would have become very precarious and this is the likely reason that he joined the army presumably as a regimental piper, even though he was around fifty years of age. One of his surviving poems reflects this new insecure situation. The poem was probably written around 1761, MacMurchy having enlisted in the army was serving overseas, "in an area where French was spoken.", probably Canada. In all likelihood he was serving with either the 77th Regiment Montgomery's Highlanders raised in 1757 and disbanded 1763, or in the 100th Regiment commanded by Major Colin Campbell of Kilberry, raised in 1761, and also disbanded 1763: -

With looking back on my folly  
Full of grief and of horror  
That I sold my freedom  
My family and my peace.  
Heavy is this yoke on my neck  
It is beyond my power to endure it  
oooooooooooo. (one line missing)  
The whip of bondage wounding me  
My tender children and my partner  
Without my making provision for their shelter

Driven to homeless destitution  
That is the pang that pierced me through and through  
It is not guile nor trickery  
On the part of gentle or simple  
But poverty and hardship  
That drove me into the net  
And the thought that I could support  
With my earnings my dear ones.  
Or never had I left them  
In the charge of the country.

(Translation taken from this poem which is in the Stewart Collection.)

William MacMurchy is thought to have died in 1778.

The fact that I've been able to identify so many individuals from before the 19<sup>th</sup> century is an indication of the fairly prominent position of the MacMarcuis family within the hierarchy of the Highland Gaelic clan system. These include details of the lives of several individual MacMarki from as long ago as 1428 with Christinus Macmarky, rector of St. Moluag Church on Skye. Then there were the five MacMarki bards and significant landowners at Laggan, Kintyre, during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Not forgetting Flora MacDonald whose family was related through at least two marriages and likely many more being as she was also a Largie MacDonald, and now William MacMurchy.

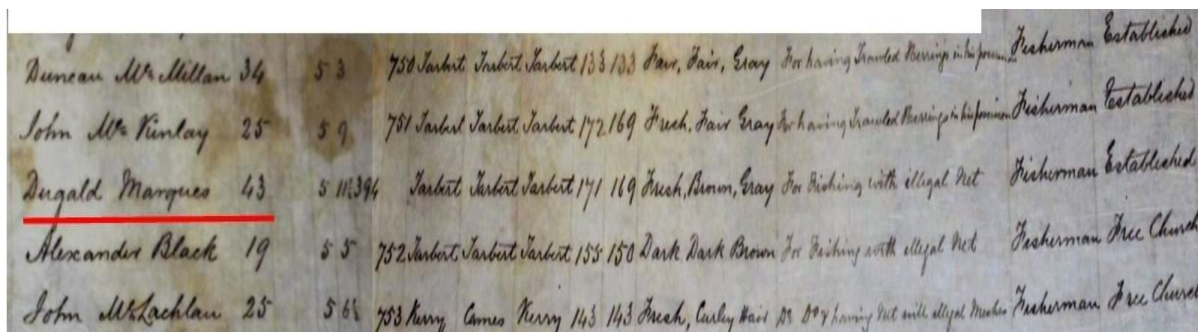
Perhaps also to their apparent criminal tendencies. Included in the list are Angus McMarques, the notorious itinerant vagabond fiddler who was found guilty of adultery with several Argyll women by the Synod of



Argyll in 1665, a very serious offense in 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland that could lead to banishment or even on rare occasions execution. And the even more notorious Christian (this normally men’s forename was a popular female forename at this time in Argyll) McMarcus who was brutally executed in 1720 for murdering her husband. Finally, the whisky smuggling tacksmen on Cara during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, who were direct ancestors of mine.

As well as my whisky smuggling relatives on Cara, my great-great-great-grandfather, Dugald Marquis, a fisherman in Tarbert, was imprisoned twice in Inveraray Jail during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as were a few of his contemporary fishermen relatives “...for the Tarbert men, when they came home to drink whisky and wash whisky down with porter, are ready to fight anybody.’ (William Black, Princess Thule, a novel written in 1873).

Steve Marquis, 2023



A copy of part of the records from Inveraray Jail Museum for 1864, showing Dugald Marquis and Alexander Black, plus three other Tarbert fishermen, serving their sentences – ‘for fishing with illegal net’ – at the same time.