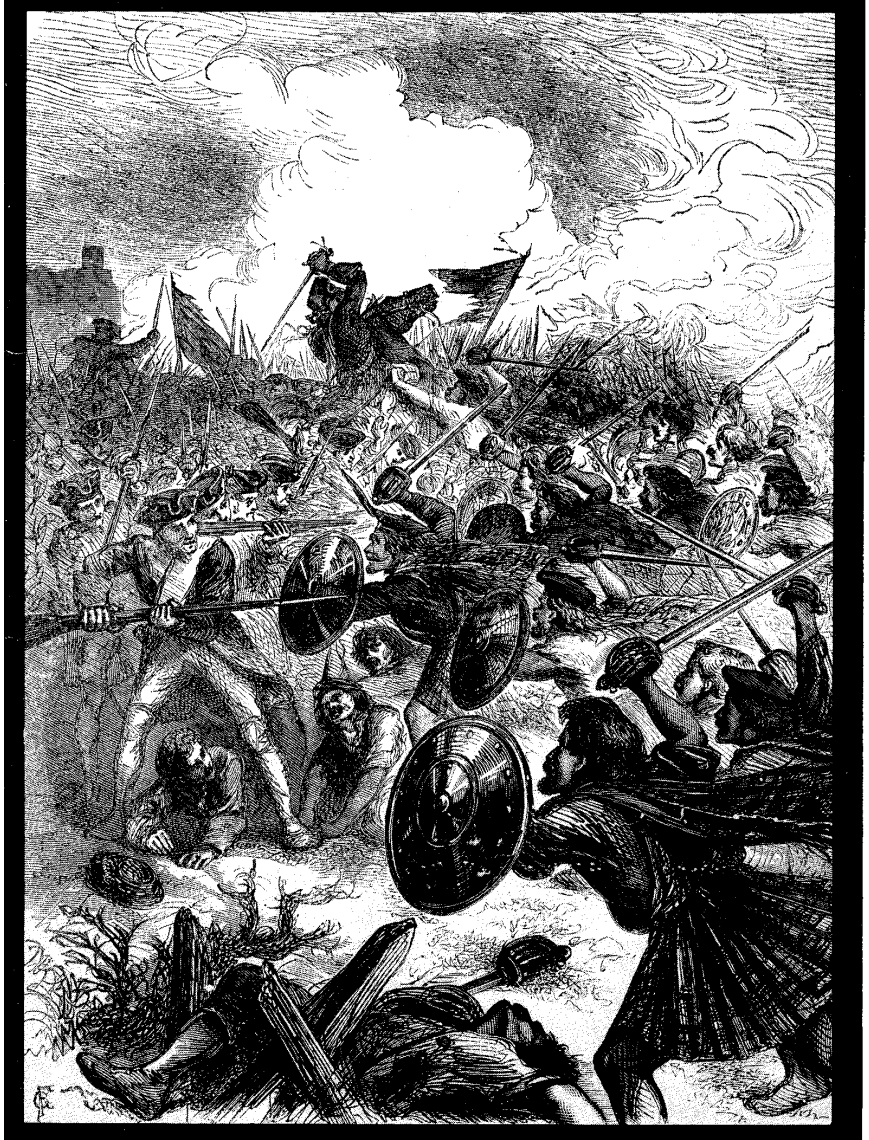
THE HIGHLAND CHARGE



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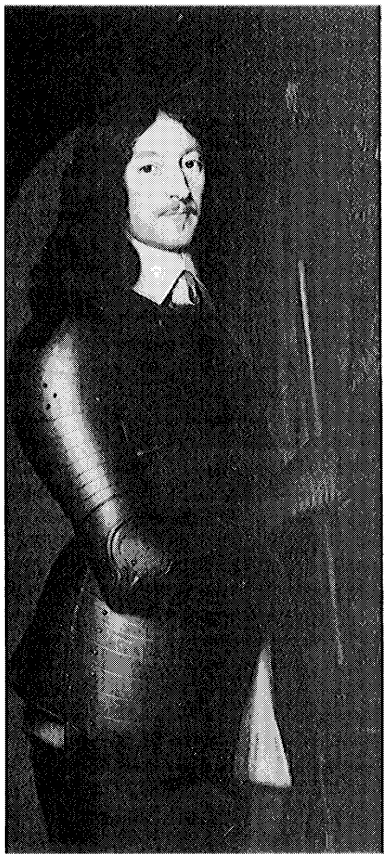
During the Highland rebellions from the mid-seventeenth century, the fighting highlanders developed a remarkable military tactic which terrified their enemies.

FROM THE DESTRUCTION OF THE Lordship of the Isles in the 1490s the Highlands and Highlanders played little part in the national life of Scotland for fully 150 years. Then suddenly in the civil wars of the 1640s Highland armies erupted dramatically onto the centre of the national stage. Thereafter for fully a century there occurred a series of periodic military eruptions by Highlanders into the Lowlands. All met with remarkable initial success, but ultimately ended in defeat for Highland armies, culminating in the final defeat of Culloden in 1746. The underlying reasons for these Highland 'rebellions' lie in political and religious history, in Highland reaction to attempts by Lowland regimes in Edinburgh (and later British regimes in London) to assert the power of central government in an area in which clan chiefs had previously enjoyed a large measure of autonomy. But what is really remarkable about these risings is not that they took place, but the way in which the highlanders often won victories in pitched battles against armies which

were usually not only larger but (in conventional military terms at least) better armed and better trained.

Part of the reason for these periodic successes that astounded and terrified the rest of Scotland and Britain clearly lies in the general qualities of Highland fighting men. They might lack training and discipline of the sort taught in the professional armies of the rest of Europe, but they were men for whom fighting and warfare were a natural part of life, the men of a warrior-society in which the skills and bravery of the fighting man were highly valued and taught to every boy from an early age. Fighting, in personal combat, cattle raid or inter-clan warfare was a natural and honourable part of life, necessary if youths were to prove their manhood. But these personal qualities of Highland fighting men were nothing new. What was new in the seventeenth century was the tactic which has become known as the Highland Charge, a tactic which allowed these qualities to be employed to best effect against Lowland and, later, British armies.

The tactic was as simple as it was successful in battle from Tippermuir in 1644 to Falkirk in 1746. A Highland army would advance to within musket-shot of the enemy. Its men would then fire a single volley of musket-fire, to which the enemy would reply. At this point the Highlanders would drop their muskets and charge at the run, drawing their swords and howling their war-cries as they did so, and fall on the enemy with broadswords in their right hands and targes or targets (round wooden shields covered in leather) on their left arms. Most of the enemy infantry would comprise musketeers, and they usually found themselves almost defenceless when the Highland Charge struck them; for having fired their first volley they would be involved in the complicated process of reloading their muskets – a job not easy to concentrate on once they realised that the Highlanders were rushing to the attack. In the seventeenth century the unfortunate musketeers had no bayonets; apart from possibly using their muskets as clubs, they had no way of defending themselves until reloading was complete. Not surprisingly musketeers in these circumstances often broke and fled before or immediately after the charge hit them. In the mid-seventeenth-century battles of the Montrose campaigns the pikemen who accompanied the musketeers were supposed to provide them with protection from attack, but the covenanters' pikemen employed against Montrose usually lacked training and discipline, and the potential for confusion when a body of unskilled men was wielding pikes up to



James Graham, 1st Marquis and 5th Earl of Montrose, 1612-1650. A painting by Honthorst.

eighteen feet in length was considerable; a mass of tangled pikes could be as useless for defence as unloaded muskets. Moreover, Highlanders developed a way of dealing with pikes by catching pike-thrusts on their targes and then hacking off their heads before the pikemen could free them.

For Highland warriors to charge into battle was nothing new; the novelty of the classic 'Highland Charge' lay in a careful balance between the employment of the old and the new. The advantages of that symbol of modern technolgy in warfare, the musket, were recognised and exploited through the opening volley. But then the Highlanders followed this up by suddenly changing to exploiting the weapon's weakness, discarding muskets in order to gain advantage over an enemy which retained them and tried to reload, by reverting to much older and more primitive weapons, sword and shield. It was in this discrimination, the ability to recognise that an 'advanced weapons system' like the musket might be of most benefit to them if they dispensed with it after the first volley that the genius of the Highland Charge lay.

What were the origins of the tactic? Surprisingly historians have paid little attention to this question. Some seem to assume that no explanation is needed as it was simply the traditional way for Highlanders to fight. Others have specifically attributed its invention to the royalist marquis of Montrose, who led the Highland armies which first won battles by use of the Highland Charge in 1644-5. Neither of these ideas, however, stands up to examination. Though, as already noted, there were strong traditional elements in the Highland Charge, it could not have emerged in the Highlands until the early seventeenth century, because not until then did two changes take place in the weapons carried by Highlanders which were essential to emergence of the classic Highland Charge.

Firstly, and most obviously, large numbers of Highlanders had to be equipped with muskets, and it may well be that this did not happen until the 1640s. Secondly, the traditional Highland two-handed sword had to be abandoned in favour of the single-handed, basket-hilted sword and the defensive targe; and this process evidently was not completed until after 1600. Thus two separate changes in armaments, which happened to coincide, were necessary before the Highland Charge could develop.

Until recently it has seemed that, if anyone was to be credited with inventing the tactic, Montrose had the best claim. But new evidence has produced a new claimant, in the person of Montrose's second in command, the great hero of Gaelic tradition Alasdair MacColla (sometimes better known in the anglicised version of his name, adorned with ranks and titles in which, as a Gaelic warrior-leader, he took no interest, as Major General Sir Alexander MacDonald).

As a refugee in Ireland, driven from his family lands by the Clan Campbell in the early stages of the Scottish civil war between Charles I and the covenanters, Alasdair MacColla found himself caught up in the war which followed the great Irish Catholic rising of 1641. He soon earned himself a notable reputation for bravery and leadership, though not for consistency or trustworthiness – he managed to change sides three times in the course of a single year! In this fighting lies his claim to be the first leader known to have combined the essential ingredients of the 'Highland Charge'. On February 11th, 1642, a day to be known long after by local protestants as Black Friday, Alasdair ambushed a strong force of protestant settlers in the area known as the Laney in County Antrim. The attack from ambush was a tactic much favoured by the Irish in wars against the English in the previous century, but at the Laney a new feature is recorded; the most detailed account of the battle notes that early in the conflict Alasdair 'com-

manded his murderers to lay downe all their fyre-arms' and that his men then fell on the enemy with swords 'in such a furious and irresistible manner, that it was reported that not a man of them escaped'. Thus the earliest known use of the Highland Charge occurs in Ireland, executed by a force that was probably largely made up of native Irish, though Alasdair's men also included some refugees from the Highlands and some of the MacDonnells of Antrim (a branch of the MacDonald clan which had settled in Ireland).

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that the army which first used the Highland Charge in battle in Scotland was also largely Irish. In 1644 Alasdair MacColla led an Irish expeditionary force (again including some Highland refugees and MacDonnells of Antrim) of something under two thousand men to the Highlands. This force put itself under the command of the Lowland royalist leader the marquis of Montrose, who was supposed to have raised the Lowland royalists in arms against the regime of the covenanters. He had failed to persuade Lowlanders to rise in significant numbers, and therefore the army with which he embarked on his amazing 'year of victories' was largely made up of the Irish, reinforced by men from some of the anti-Campbell Highland clans.

Thus Alasdair MacColla and the Irish brought the 'Highland' Charge to the Highlanders; but credit must be given to Montrose for recognising the advantages of a tactic which must at first have seemed very alien to him and highly risky. To some extent he may have, in the first instance at least, had little choice. If the Irish insisted on fighting as they thought best under their trusted leader Alasdair MacColla, there was little he could do about it without danger of provoking them into rejecting his authority over them. Moreover practical difficulties may have forced him into abandoning the idea of conventional tactics in which musketeers advanced slowly on the enemy firing successive volleys, accompanied by pikemen, who would play a leading role when it came to hand to hand fighting or 'push of pike'. Montrose's men were desperately short of ammunition, and there were few pikemen among them.

On September 2nd, 1644 Montrose's Gaelic army of Highlanders and Irish faced the covenanters' Lowland levies at Tippermuir (or Tibbermore) near Perth. The centre of Montrose's army was made up of the Irish troops, and it was essentially their Highland Charge which won the battle. After firing one volley they charged, determined not to let the enemy have time to take advantage of their superior fire power. Unnerved by the unexpectedness and ferocity of the charge the covenanters' infantry began to collapse in panic as the Irish reached them. Fighting quickly changed to slaughter, and many hundreds of covenanters were killed as they fled in complete disorder. This established the pattern for most of Montrose's subsequent victories; the opening volley, the ferocious charge, the collapse of the enemy after a relatively brief engagement in which comparatively few casualties occurred, and the long pursuit in which no mercy was shown.

At Aberdeen (September 13th, 1644) the Highland Charge was only one element in a rather confused engagement. At Inverlochy (February 2nd, 1645) the Irish (forming the two wings of Montrose's army) held their fire for longer than usual, on Alasdair MacColla's instructions, firing their volley at point blank range before dropping their muskets and 'leapeing in amongst the enemy with there swords and targates'. The next of Montrose's victories, at Auldearn (May 9th, 1645) owed little if anything to the Highland Charge, as his army was surprised by the enemy at dawn, but it may have been used early in the battle when a small force led by Alasdair held off the first enemy attack, making several charges. At Alford (July 2nd, 1645) Alasdair MacColla was not present, and as the covenanters again seized the initiative by attacking first there is no evidence that the Highland Charge was attempted. But in Montrose's last and greatest victory, at Kilsyth (August 15th, 1645), it was again the Charge which brought success.

The Irish had introduced the Charge to Scotland, though it was under a Highland leader, Alasdair MacColla, that it had first brought them victory in Ireland. During the Montrose campaigns Highlanders had eagerly adopted it. Alasdair took it back to Ireland with him when he was finally driven out of Scotland in 1647, and as lieutenant general of an Irish Catholic confederate army his Highland Charge swept all before it when he commanded the right wing at the battle of Knocknanuss or

Weapons of the Highlanders.
(Top) A basket-hilted broadsword of the mid-eighteenth century.

(Above) A late seventeenth-century dirk inscribed 'A soft ansuer tourneth away wrath' and 'Thy king and countrie's cause defend though on the spot your life should end.'

(Right) A late seventeenth-century targe of wood covered with leather and brass nails.

'Champion of the Lairds of Grant'. Painting by Waitte; early eighteenth century.

THE HIGHLAND CHARGE: CHRONOLOGY

1637	Revolt of the Scottish Covenanters against Charles I
1641	Irish Catholic rising
1642	First known use of the Highland Charge in battle – by Alasdair MacColla in Ulster
1644	Irish confederate expeditionary force under Alasdair MacColla lands in the Highlands of Scotland and joins the royalist leader, the Marquis of Montrose
1644-5	Montrose's 'Year of Victories': six major victories in battles, in most of which the Highland Charge plays a central part
1645	Montrose defeated at Philiphaugh
1646	Montrose disbands his forces and goes into exile
1647	Alasdair MacColla retreats back to Ireland and is there killed in battle
1650	Montrose executed by the Covenanters after an unsuccessful rising
1688-9	The 'Glorious Revolution' replaces James II and VII on the thrones of England and Scotland with William III and II
1689	Highland Jacobite rising in the name of King James led by Viscount Dundee. The Highland Charge brings victory at Killiecrankie, but Dundee is killed and the rising collapses
1715	The Highland Charge brings initial success to the Jacobites at the battle of Sheriffmuir, but the battle is drawn and the rising again collapses
1745-6	The Highland Charge contributes to victory for the Jacobites at Prestonpans and Falkirk, but fails to save them from defeat at Culloden

Cnoc na nDos (November 13th, 1647). Having fired a volley (or perhaps, on this occasion, two) he and his men came 'routing downe like a Torrent impetuously on our foot', in the words of an enemy officer. But the rest of the Irish army was driven from the field, and Alasdair and his men were surrounded after their initial success. Eventually Alasdair himself was captured, and soon afterwards in circumstances that remain obscure was killed by his captors.

The Highland Charge may have been used in some of the small-scale engagements between Highland royalists and Cromwellian forces in the 1650s, but its next appearance in a major battle is at Killiecrankie (July 27th, 1689), when the Jacobite army of 'Bonnie Dundee' faced the troops of William III. As at Inverlochy the preliminary musket volley was fired not before the Charge began but during it, at very close range, guns then being dropped and swords drawn by the Highlanders; and as in many of Montrose's victories the enemy broke and fled almost immediately.

At Sheriffmuir (November 13th, 1715) the charge failed to win the Jacobites another great victory however. This was partly through confusion and the uninspiring leadership of the earl of Mar, and partly due to better weapons and training in the enemy army; the introduction of firelock muskets, faster to load than the old matchlocks, and of the bayonet, meant that the enemy infantry could not be so easily overwhelmed as in the past. Nonetheless, the results of the charge could still be devastating. The Highlanders on the right wing of the Jacobite army charged the enemy, firing as they came, threw themselves flat when the enemy replied with a volley, then jumped up, threw away their 'fuzies' (matchlocks) and drew their swords. 'Like Furies' they ran right up to the barrels of the enemy muskets, used their targes to push aside the bayonets (as formerly they had been used to deal with pikes), and 'with their broad Swords spread nothing but Death and Terror where-ever they came'. The enemy line was repeatedly pierced 'with ane incredible vigour and rapiditie' within four minutes of the Highlanders first being ordered to charge. As one account indignantly reports, the regular infantry behaved gallantly and resisted as long as they could, but were 'unacquainted with this Savage Way of Fighting, against which all the Rules of War had made no Provision'. Conventional training for conventional European warfare was little use against Highlanders, who were unsporting enough to break the rules.

Thus failure to win a clear-cut victory at Sheriffmuir did not discredit the

Highland Charge. Continuing faith in the tactic was fully justified, for it once again brought victory when used by the Jacobites in the first major engagement of the '45 rising, at Prestonpans (September 21st, 1745). This confused engagement saw a number of small-scale Charges following the well established pattern of musket fire followed by attack with swords and targes, and as at Tippermuir, Kilsyth and Killiecrankie the end result was not just defeat of the enemy but a total rout in which they broke and fled in complete confusion, terrified fugitives being cut down in a long pursuit. Again it was the speed of the Highland Charge and its immediate success which caused most amazement; this time the estimate was that five minutes elapsed from the main Charge beginning to the breaking of the enemy.

Not surprisingly there was much debate in military circles as to how a Highland Charge should be resisted, a realisation that unconventional enemy tactics required a rethinking of one's own tactics. The best analysis came from Lieutenant General Henry Hawley, a veteran of Sheriffmuir, who as Commander-in-Chief in Scotland issued a directive on the matter to his troops. There was, he encouraged his men, nothing as easy as resisting the Highland Charge, provided officers and men were not demoralised by listening to rumours about how terrifying and irresistible it was. The key to defeating Highlanders lay in discipline in holding one's fire. Infantry should be drawn up in three ranks, each of which would fire at different times. The rear rank must not fire until the Highlanders were within ten or twelve yards of the front ranks; volleys from the centre and front rank should then follow in turn, discharged at point blank range. Thus infantry should not reply to the preliminary volley fired by the Highlanders, and therefore have to reload at the critical moment, but hold their fire as long as possible. Even now that firelocks, cartridge loaded, had replaced the old matchlock, decreasing the advantage given to the Highlanders by their tactic, Hawley stressed that if you fired too soon you would never be able to reload. 'If the fire is given at a distance you probably will be broke for you never get time to load a second Cartidge, and if you give way you may give your foot for dead, for they [the Highlanders] being without a firelock or any load, no man with his arms, accountrements etc. can escape them, and they give no Quarters, but if you will but observe the above directions, they are the most despicable Enimy that are'. Theory and practice are, however, very different things. Only four days after issuing these confident instructions the army led by Hawley was routed at the battle of Falkirk (January 17th, 1746). Ironically the Highlanders opened the battle by giving an example of the disciplined use of firepower of the sort Hawley had urged on his own men; an attack by Hawley's cavalry was defeated when the Highlanders held their fire to deliver a devastating volley when the enemy were only ten yards from them. At least one Highland Charge contributed to the

An incident in the Rebellion of '45.
Painting by David Morier. Highlanders being slaughtered by English troops.

A contemporary cartoon of *The Highland Chace or the Pursuit of the Rebels*, with the duke of Cumberland in his carriage, 1745.

Jacobite victory, when Highlanders on the Jacobite right overran the opposing infantry. An Irish Jacobite officer called this 'perhaps one of the boldest and finest actions, that any troops of the world could be capable of', though he claimed that the Highlanders had been forced to abandon their muskets as it proved difficult to reload them in pouring rain, since they lacked the modern cartridges used by the enemy.

Nonetheless, despite the incompetence he displayed at Falkirk, Hawley's conviction that regular troops who kept their heads could defeat a Highland charge was sound – though it required much of the troops in discipline, courage and skill. Such troops fought under the duke of Cumberland at Culloden (April 16th, 1646). Their determination combined with the advantages of firelock muskets, cartridges, ring bayonets, and training in new ideas for bayonet fighting designed specifically to prevent Highlanders blocking bayonet-thrusts with their targes. Moreover many in the Jacobite army had already concluded that their cause was lost, and it was known that the enemy greatly outnumbered them. The accuracy of Cumberland's opening artillery bombardment added further to the demoralisation of the Highlanders. The Highland Charge when it came was ragged and lacked something of its usual ferocity. Confusion may have been caused by a last-minute order calling for a change in the usual tactics; the Highlanders were not only told to hold their fire until they were close to the enemy, but that 'they must on no account fling away their muskets'. If a Highlander obeyed he had the choice of relying in his bayonet, a weapon in which he had little skill or faith, or of trying to fight with sword and targe while still encumbered with a musket. It would be wrong to suggest that this had any significant effect on the outcome of the battle (many Highlanders took so little heed of the order that they threw away their muskets without even firing them), but it can hardly have helped Highland morale. Disciplined firing by Cumberland's men, rank by rank at close range, partially destroyed the impetus of the charge. Some of the Highlanders broke through the line at one point, but they were halted by Cumberland's second line, though they fought to the end with remarkable courage; some were reduced to throwing stones futilely at the enemy, for want of better weapons, before being finally overcome. What is most notable about this, the last use in battle of the Highland Charge, is not that it failed, for the odds were so heavily weighed against the Jacobites at Culloden that failure was almost inevitable, but that the Charge should even have penetrated Cumberland's first line. That it did so is a remarkable tribute to the tactic's effectiveness, and to the outstanding fighting qualities of the traditional Highland warrior.

Thus the Highland Charge made a major contribution to Montrose's 'year of victories', and to the Highlanders' 'century of victories' which the Montrose campaigns began. It was Alasdair MacColla's most important legacy to his fellow-Highlanders, brought by him, appropriately, from Ireland, the original homeland of the Gael. It enabled Highlanders to make their grievances against Lowland and British regimes heard much more loudly than they would otherwise have been. But though heard, the voice was not listened to, for occasional epic victories failed to bring any permanent advantage to the Highlanders. The success of a tactic could not outweigh Scottish and British political realities. From start to finish the Highland Charge was associated exclusively with lost causes.

FOR FURTHER READING:

The career of Alasdair MacColla and his contribution to the Montrose campaigns has been considered in detail for the first time in D. Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the Seventeenth Century*, (Edinburgh 1980), while the Irish background to the campaigns is dealt with in the same author's *Scottish Covenanters and Irish Confederates* (Belfast 1981). The best biography of Montrose is E.J. Cowan, *Montrose, for Covenant and King* (London 1977). C.S. Terry, *John Grahan of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee* (London 1905) has a good, detailed account of Killiecrankie, and his *The Jacobites and the Union* (Cambridge 1922) contains excerpts from a number of accounts of Sheriffmuir. K. Tomasson and F. Buist, *Battles of the '45* (London 1962) is invaluable. J.T. Dunbar, *History of Highland Dress* (London 1962, reprinted 1979) has a very useful chapter on Highland weapons.