Chapter X

Golden Chalice of Iona and Macleans of Duart
The chalice is figured on various early Scottish ecclesiastical seals, as well as on sepulchral slabs and other medieval sculptures. But an original Scottish chalice, a relic of the venerable abbey of St. Columba, preserved till a very few years since an older example of the sacred vessels of the altar than is indicated in any existing memorial of the medieval Church. The later history of this venerable relic is replete with interest. It was of fine gold, of a very simple form, and ornamented in a style that gave evidence of its belonging to a very early period. It was transferred from the possession of Sir Lauchlan MacLean to the Glengarry family, in the time of Æneas, afterwards created by Charles II. Lord Macdonell and Arross, under the circumstances narrated in the following letter from a cousin of the celebrated Marshal Macdonald, Duke of Tarentum, and communicated to me by a clergyman,¹ who obtained it from the family of the gentleman to whom it was originally addressed:—

"The following anecdote I heard from the late bishop, John Chisholm, and from Mr. John M'Eeachan, uncle to the Duke of Tarentum, who died at my house at Inr Moidart, aged upwards of one hundred years:—

"Maclean of Duart expecting an invasion of his lands in Mull, by his powerful neighbour the Earl of Argyll, applied to Glengarry for assistance. Æneas of Glengarry marched at the head of five hundred men to Ardtornish, nearly opposite Duart Castle, and crossing with a few of his officers to arrange the passage of the men across the Sound of Mull, Maclean, rejoicing at the arrival of such a friend, offered some choice wine in a golden chalice, part of the plunder of Iona. Glengarry was struck with horror, and said, folding his handkerchief about the chalice,

¹ Rev. Æneas M'Donell Dawson.
ABOVE: The McLeans also had some of the library books and MS from Iona. They took them to the castle on Tresnish Isles “belonging to the chief of the McLeans” (had been MacDonald’s). Cairn Burgh was thought impregnable. However, most were destroyed by fire after an attack in the time of Cromwell (Hebrides; MacDonald, James; p.702 – as told by Dr Walker, c.1764.)

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‘Maclean, I came here to defend you against mortal enemies, but since by sacrilege and profanation you have made God your enemy, no human means can serve you.’ Glengarry returned to his men, and Maclean sent the chalice and some other pieces of plate belonging to the service of the altar, with a deputation of his friends, to persuade him to join them; but he marched home. His example was followed by several other chiefs, and poor Maclean was left to compete single-handed with his powerful enemy.”

Such was the last historical incident connected with the golden chalice of Iona, perhaps without exception the most interesting ecclesiastical relique which Scotland possessed. Unfortunately its later history only finds a parallel in that of the celebrated Danish golden horns. It was preserved in the charter-chest of Glengarry, until it was presented by the late Chief to Bishop Ronald McDonald, on whose demise it came into the possession of his successor, Dr. Scott, Bishop of Glasgow. Only five years since the sacristy of St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church in that city, where it was preserved, was broken into, and before the police could obtain a clue to the depredators, the golden relique of Iona was no longer a chalice. Thus perished by the hands of a common felon a memorial of the spot consecrated by the labours of some of the earliest Christian missionaries to the Pagan Caledonians, and which had probably survived the vicissitudes of upwards of ten centuries. In reply to inquiries made as to the existence of any drawing of the chalice, or even the possibility of a trustworthy sketch being executed from memory, a gentleman in Glasgow writes:—“I have no means of getting even a sketch from which to make a drawing. Were I a good hand myself I could easily furnish one, having often examined it. It was a chalice that no one could look on without being convinced of its very great antiquity. The workmanship was rude, the ornamental drawings or engravings even more hard than medieval ones in their outlines, and the cup bore mark of the original hammering which had beaten it into shape.”

MACLEAN CHIEFS “MOLESTING THE CONVENT” & “VIOLENTLY INTRUDE IN POSSESSION OF IONA”

In January, 1638, king James IV. granted a letter of protection to his religious and ecclesiastic, the Lady Agnes, daughter of Donald Macgillivray, Prior of the monastery of Inis of the most blessed virgin Mary in the island of St. Columbus, and specially charged James McIlgillivray of Dunvegan, Bailie, son of Alas Macquory, and John Mcgilvray of Lochlay not to trouble the said Priorice and convent.* The evidence shows that these chiefs had been molesting the convent in regard to its “hunts, revenues, possessions, damage tenants, families, servants, and their movables.”

On March 14, 1638, King Charles I. writes to Sir Lochlan MacLean of Dunvegan, desiring him to restore the island of Iona to the bishop of the isles. He also says that the Bishop of the Isles has been in possession of the isle of Yooluckill which belongs to the Bishop of the Isles for the time; whereas they have been in perceivable possession these many years by way of the present Bishop thereof:—We hold such a violent and inquiet a course as a contempt done unto the church and consecrate unto us; and withal taking to our princely consideration the detriment thereby arising to the patrimonies of that Bishop and the absolute possession of the said Yool without further hearing or delay.”

1508, James IV. (MacLean, History of Clan MacLean; pp.325 and 329; 1899) 1635, Charles I.