

9494.b.49

with photographs by DAVID HICKS

THE HIGHLAND CLANS



1967

1255

BARRIE & ROCKLIFF

SIR IAIN MONCREIFFE
OF THAT ILK Albany Herald

The dynastic origins, chiefs
and background of the Clans
connected with Highland history
and of some other families

LONDON

Cumming

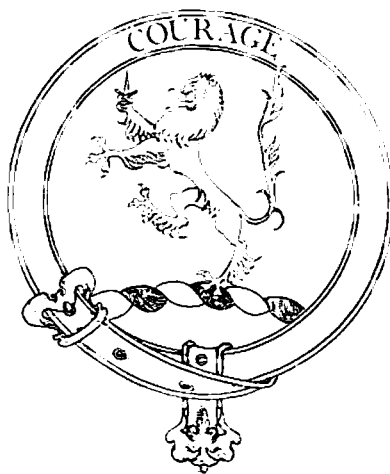
The name Cumming is more properly Cummin, often spelt Comyn. It is a typical Norman nickname, taken no doubt from the herb called cummin, which the Concise Oxford English Dictionary describes as an 'umbelliferous plant like fennel, with aromatic seed'—and then proceeds to relate happily to kümmel. The three bundles of plants in the Cummin coat-of-arms, usually blazoned as *garbs* or *wheatsheaves*, were doubtless originally bundles of cummin.

The first Cummin to settle in Scotland was a powerful Anglo-Norman churchman, a close confidant of King David I, under whom he became Chancellor of Scotland. William Cummin the Chancellor also held the Bishopric of Durham by force (against the consent of the chapter) for some three years, but after his nephew William Cummin was killed in the dispute, he gave up the bishopric in 1144 in return for the castle and Honour of Northallerton being given to another nephew, Richard Cummin, ancestor of the Scottish clan.

Richard Cummin, lord of Northallerton, married the granddaughter and eventual heiress of King Donald III *Ban* (Shakespeare's 'Donald-bane'), the King of Scots who had been deposed and blinded in 1097. King Donald III's family seem to have been appanaged in Lochaber and Badenoch at the expense of the MacWilliams, whose progenitor King Duncan II had been slain by King Donald. After the overthrow of the MacWilliams in 1230, the Cummins became undisputed Lords of Badenoch, holding also much of Lochaber and the 'Great Glen'. Richard Cummin himself was dead by 1182, and his widow married the Earl of Atholl—by whom she was maternal grandmother of *Kelethathonin*, probably the local chief called Gillechattan whose descendants, the Clan Chattan of Lochaber and Badenoch, were long at feud over rival land claims with the Cummins.

During the thirteenth century, the Cummins became the most powerful and patriotic noble family in all Scotland. At this period, the highest rank in Scotland was that of earl, held only by the mightiest cousins of the king or by the heirs of former local kings, and there were only thirteen earldoms altogether. In 1242 Alexander Cummin was Earl of Buchan, Walter Cummin was Earl of Menteith and John Cummin was Earl of Angus, all as the result of further marriages to Celtic dynastic heiresses. So nearly a quarter of the Scottish earls were Cummins, and the Cummins themselves had come to have as much Celtic as Norman blood (which scientists now prefer to call genes). From 1270 to 1308 the Cummins also held the great military office of hereditary Constable of Scotland, whose duties included the guarding of the king's own person. A Cummin endowed the rebuilding of Glasgow Cathedral in those halcyon days.

Their chief, 'the Black Cummin', was one of the Competitors for the Crown of Scotland in 1291—claiming as heir of King Donald III. He



The ruins of Dunphail Castle, once a Cumming stronghold. Legend has it that the 'old knight' of Dunphail and his five younger sons were beheaded here by an Earl of Moray, and that their skulls were dug up accidentally in 1712 (when the castle belonged to the Dunbars) and given decent burial. The 'old knight's' eldest son, Alasdair *Ban* Cummin, is said to have been smoked out of a cave and dirked before Dunphail was captured, and his head thrown over to his father in the castle. But this tale, if true, would seem to belong to an earlier period than the present ruins.



married the sister of King John Balliol, who won the competition, and (after the much-maligned King John's forced abdication) this greatly strengthened the royal claims of his son, 'the Red Cummin'. These claims led to the downfall of the Cummins. Their rival, Robert Bruce, stabbed the Red Cummin during a conference within the precincts of a church—and believed himself to have been punished with leprosy as a result.

During the long wars that followed, King Robert destroyed the Cummins. The Red Cummin's only son, rightful Lord of Badenoch and chief of the name, was killed in action against his father's slayer on the field of Bannockburn. His heiresses carried abroad the family claim to the Scottish throne; and it is ironical to reflect that when the exiled Stuarts (heirs of Bruce) fled to refuge in France, the then heir of Balliol and of the Red Cummin was their host King Louis XIV himself: today it is the Duke of Parma. The junior co-heir of the Red Cummin, curiously enough, is the Premier Baron of England (Lord Mowbray and Stourton), who quarters the Arms of Cummin and has returned to live in Scotland.

The Buchan branch of the Cummins were also destroyed. After harrying Buchan with fire and sword, Bruce gave the Cummin castle of Slains—together with their hereditary office of Constable of Scotland—to his own friend and supporter the Hay lord of Erroll, whose grandmother had been a Cummin. As the present Lord High Constable is a woman (the Countess of Erroll) it is interesting to reflect that, had the Cummins triumphed over Bruce, their present heir as Constable of Scotland would equally have been a woman: Baroness Beaumont, whose son (Major-General the Honble. Miles Fitzalan-Howard) is also eventual heir to the premier dukedom and the office of Earl Marshal of England. However, a few Cummins survived in Buchan into modern times.

Far to the north, on the borders of Badenoch, between the Spey and the Findhorn, a branch of the Cummins continued and became a clan. Their chiefs, the Cummings of Altyre, claim descent from the Red Cummin's uncle Sir Robert Cummin, who was slain by Bruce's friends while trying to save his murdered nephew in that fatal church in 1306. They received various grants from King David II and King Robert II, and by the end of the fourteenth century were once again a power to reckon with in Moray.

Their feuds with the Shaws or Mackintoshes of Clan Chattan are remembered in many a Highland legend. There is the tale of the black bull's head, and the tradition of their damming up Loch Moy to flood

out the Mackintoshes' island castle. This story could even possibly have got transferred from Loch-an-eilean castle in Rothiemurchus, which is said to have been long disputed between the two clans. But the main cause of the feud was the two clans' rival claims to Rait Castle in Strathnairn, which doubtless arose (together with the Rothiemurchus trouble) in the usual way from some family relationship between their two chiefs and a resulting inheritance dispute.

It may therefore not be unreasonable to suggest that these very Cummins were the brave Clan *Qwhewyl* (pronounced 'wheel') whom the chronicler Wyntoun tells us fought the famous duel in 1396 with the Clan *ha* (usually and probably correctly identified with the Shaws or Mackintoshes of Clan Chattan). Since the Cummin chiefs had originated in the South, and now had their principal residence at Altyre in the Laigh of Moray ('where all men taken their prey', as a later Lochiel wrote to the Laird of Grant), it may perhaps also be suggested that Wyntoun's 'Clahynnhe Qwhewyl' should be read *Clann a' Ghaill* in its sense of 'Children of the Low country-man': a name quite separately applied to the Makgills in Galloway and the MacGills in Jura.

The Clan Qwhewyl had the honour of being almost the first clan ever noticed *as a clan* in surviving Scottish contemporary record, when they took part four years earlier in the historic raid on Sir David Lindsay of Glenesk in Angus—made by a group of wild Highlandmen, some of whom were Roses and their adherents from Strathnairn, of which Sir David Lindsay was the then overlord. The fifteenth century *Book of Pluscarden* implies that the famous duel was connected with this raid. So it may further be suggested that, in the dispute over Rait Castle in Strathnairn, the Earl of Moray had encouraged his friends the Cummins, while Sir David Lindsay as overlord of Strathnairn had supported the Mackintoshes.

Certainly, the chroniclers tell us that the duel was specially arranged between them by the Earl of Moray and the Lindsay chief, as a means of bringing peace to the Highlands. The great duel, since known as the Battle of the Clans and immortalised by Sir Walter Scott, was hacked out horribly in a fenced enclosure, thirty men a side, armed with cross-bows—three arrows each, what archers call a 'pair'—and battle-axes, dirks and two-handed swords, in front of the King himself, and under the responsibility of the Lord High Constable, on the North Inch of Perth: the marshy 'island' nearest to Scone that was the special place for important Trials by Combat in mediaeval Scotland.

The largest rhinoceros horns ever shot and (for obvious reasons) of great value. This trophy was slain by the famous African explorer and Big Game hunter Roualeyn Gordon Cumming (1820-1866), brother of the then Chief.

The present House of Altyre, formerly the dower house and now the home of the Chief of the Cummin clan.





The Clan Qwhewyl chieftain engaged in the combat, if Wyntoun gives the 'chiffanys twa' in the same order as he names the clans, was either Sir Farquhar's son or else Shaw Farquhar's-son: 'Schir Ferqwharis sone' according to the standard edition, but 'Sha Fercharson' according to Professor Skene; and Wyntoun's continuator Bower (who reverses the two leaderships) calls him *Scheabeg* or 'Little Shaw'. Farquhar and Shaw were both favoured Clan Chattan names, but if the dispute arose because of a family row, both clans probably favoured the same Christian names. So it may not be a coincidence that the duel was fought in the lifetime of Farquhar Cummin of Altyre: indeed a later branch of the Cummins took the surname of Farquharson after a descendant of the same name. Moreover, the Irish Gaels often render John as Shane—and Farquhar Cummin of Altyre had a younger son John, a name often rendered locally as Shaw.

Farquhar's eldest son, Sir Alexander Cummin of Altyre, married the same Earl of Moray's sister in 1408. The 'Clanchewill' still appear as such in 1594, immediately after the 'Clanchattane' and before the 'Clanchamron' (to which clans they clearly therefore did not belong) in the official Parliamentary list of thieving clans, which includes such other neighbours as the Grants but which very curiously omits all reference to the Cummins (if they were not the Clanchewill) despite their continuing tradition of lawlessness on the fringes of the Highlands.

As late as 1664, Robert Cumming of Altyre was summoned by the Privy Council, as chief of his clan, to find caution (security guaranteed in cash) for the good behaviour of his whole Name and Clan. The other clans had a rhyme: *fhad's bhios maide anns a' choill cha bhi Cuimeanach gun fhoill*, 'so long as there is a stick in the wood there will be treachery in a Cumming'. The Cummings prefer the form: *fhad's bhios maide anns a' choill cha bhi foill an Cuimeanach*, 'so long as there is a stick in the wood there will be no treachery in a Cumming'—but alas, it doesn't rhyme.

The chiefs have held the Barony of Altyre near Forres ever since the Middle Ages. The present chief, Sir William Gordon Cumming of Altyre (whose coat-of-arms has the *three garbs* of Cummin, gold on blue), still lives there—although he recently blew up their vast Victorian mansion and replaced it with a splendid cowshed, as all the modern conveniences of water, drainage and electricity were already connected to the site.

A combine harvester at Altyre, carrying Sir William Gordon Cumming of Altyre, 6th Baronet, present Chief of the Cummins, who in the thirteenth century were the most powerful Name in all Scotland. A former

Regular officer in the Royal Scots Greys, Sir William is now a highly-mechanised farmer in the Laigh of Moray, on land which the Cummings have held against all comers since the Middle Ages.

