

SPUINNEADAIR AIR A SPUINNEADH

OR THE BITER BIT.

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- An old Tale of Skye

Retold by JAMES MACLEOD NICOL, M.A., B.Com.

Overseas Secretary, CLAN MACLEOD SOCIETY. -

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Some of the exploits of the notorious (or famous) Admiral John Paul Jones - pirate to the British, but hero to our American clansfolk are well-known, notably his cheeky raid on his native parish of Kirkbean in Kirkcudbrightshire in 1778. But the fact that he once threatened Dunvegan Castle is perhaps not so well-known.

The incident was told to the present writer by his grandmother, Flora MacLeod of Kilmarnock, who had heard it recited to her, when a young girl, by some old seanchaidh at a ceilidh in Skye.

It appears that during the American War of Independence, in the late summer of the year 1779, Paul Jones' fleet was reported off the Western Isles of Scotland and all shipping had been warned to be on the look-out. So, on the afternoon of 30th August, when MacLeod of Waterstein saw a large majo' war, with raking masts and square sails sailing from the direction of the Isle of Barra towards Skye, he had little doubt that this must indeed be Paul Jones' flagship "Richard". He immediately sent off two of his men to Bracadale and Waternish to warn the folks there, whilst he, himself, with MacLeod of Hamer (who was with him at the time) set off on horseback for the Castle at Dunvegan.

In the meantime the vessel rounded Dunvegan Head and drew in past Galtrigal on the west side of the loch with shortened sails. Further up the loch, Allan MacLeod, fisherman to the Chief, was casting his lines off Husabost and he became alarmed when he saw the strange, large vessel. She flew no flags - who was she? And what was she doing there? Then remembering the warning to be on the look-out for the mauraunders, he beat back across the loch ~~as~~ to warn the Chief's Factor. The Chief, himself, Captain (later General) Norman MacLeod, being with the British Forces in America at the time.

Great was the consternation at the Castle when Allan arrived with his news, soon to be confirmed by Waterstein and Hamer. But the Factor, good man, kept his head and immediately made arrangements for the Treasures Three - the Flag, the Horn and the Cup, along with the plate and other valuables to be removed to a place of safety. This he did by packing them into three creels and putting his own baby son into a fourth and fastening them on to two pack ponies, ~~He~~ had them taken to a place of safety in the hills along with the women and children, under the care of Allan and his mate Donald MacLean.

Meantime the men at arms were preparing the Castle against attack.

By now the large ship had come in sight of the castle anxiously watched by the look-out on the tower and the clansmen manning the ramparts. Throughout the bright moonlit August night they observed every movement aboard the uninvited vessel. At daybreak ~~the~~ two small boats were seen to be lowered from the man o' war, rowed round to the bow and start towing the huge hulk.

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Just as the small boat had reached the bow of the vessel the Commander, <sup>heard</sup> weird wailing noises and beheld a strange sight on the Dunvegan road - six pipers playing a coronach and followed by what appeared to be a great column of highlanders. Paul Jones, for so indeed, the uninvited guest proved to be, decided that this must be the vanguard of an army marching to the defence of Dunvegan Castle and deeming that, on this occasion at least, ~~that~~ discretion was the better part of valour, immediately gave instructions to turn the "Richard" and set sail with all haste for the Little Minch to rejoin his fleet. He was last seen being chased by two British gunboats off the Butt of Lewis.

The Macleods had the last laugh, however, for the "army" which the gallant admiral imagined he saw was, in fact, the funeral procession of Gobha Mor - Donald MacLeod of Swordale (an ancestor of the Very Rev. George F. MacLeod, M.C., D.D.) being carried out in true Highland fashion and heading for the burial ground at Kilmuir. The mourners were quite unaware of the commotion at the Castle and possibly too intent on their own mourning to have observed the "Richard".

It is doubtful if Paul Jones ever learnt the true facts but all Skye did, for on board the "Richard" were two members of the Clan - Callum and his brother Rory from the little island of Isay who had been taken prisoner at the point of the musket by a raiding party from the "Richard". They were taken on board and, under duress, but with the promise of <sup>freedom and a</sup> reward when the vessel left Skye, forced to pilot the "Richard" in Loch Follart. To his credit Jones kept his word and set the brothers down on the island of Barra with a fuller purse than when they had been captured. When Callum and Rory returned home their story was soon all over Skye and that is how the tale came to be handed down.

The seanchaidh finished his recitation by asserting that even in death Gobha Mor continued to serve his beloved Chief.

One wonders what Admiral Jones wrote in his log book on August 31st, 1779?