

CHAPTER 15

Historic Value

15.1 **On behalf of HS, Professor Lenman stated** that Castle Tioram has to be seen in its historical contexts to achieve a sensitive understanding of the nature and current significance of the monument. It belongs to a remarkable group of seaboard castles in the western Highlands, mostly in Argyll and the Isles. Of these the earliest appears to be Castle Sween which seems to be of the late 11th century. Gaelic poetry has traditionally been seen to link the site with the long history of the dominance of seaways and the galley (birlinn) in the political and social culture of the Celtic Western Highlands in the post-Viking era. It is in this context that Castle Tioram was constructed with a group of other similar castles from the 13th to the 14th centuries. Castle Tioram is particularly linked with Mingarry and Kismull Castles, being both in time and architecture a close relative of the former. Its site is, even in this distinguished company, very striking.

15.2 The sub-Viking world (the first context), where sea access was the key to war, trade and social intercourse within the Gaeltacht, survived into the reign of James VI. James was determined to break these linkages and only one personal galley was authorised per chief and the traditional construction centres were all destroyed. In that sense, Castle Tioram became obsolete in the early 17th century, as the land connections between the West Highlands and the Lowlands of Scotland, 'the Road to the Isles', replaced water links to the rest of the Gaeltacht.

15.3 It can be argued that the castle failed in the long run to find a secure niche as an administrative centre within the context of the survival of clanned power as a regional part of the community of the realm of Scotland. After the progressive forfeiture of the Macdonald Lordship of the Isles from 1493, the various Macdonald groups functioned as separate clans. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688-90, the Clanranald chiefs accepted with far less fuss than MacDonal of Glengarry the use of their traditional seat as an outlying garrison by a Williamite government. They had retreated to a more convenient centre for the administration of their main estates, and did so by building a more comfortable house at Ormiclate in safely Roman Catholic South Uist. This was wholly rational, for Castle Tioram had been designed for a world they had lost, indeed a world long gone. Geographically it only made sense in terms of that world. Hence the very shadowy nature of the third major phase in the history of the castle - its association with the Jacobite risings.

15.4 The elevation of the Jacobites to mythic stature by 19th century nostalgia and romantic conservatism perhaps makes this the main aspect of the castle's story for the average person who has heard of the place, but it was actually a marginal business. It played no role in the romantic 'lost cause' of the '45 and all we have is a poorly documented but very predictable role in the 1715. Even if the documentation is faulty, the generally received story has the virtue of making good military logic and corresponding precisely with what one would expect in terms of sensible decisions by intelligent commanders. It was not in the least surprising that after taking the place and its garrison Clanranald seems to have burned it. That was the correct and standard military decision. In any case the place meant little to Clanranald. It was a dangerous anachronism in 1715 which is perhaps why the proposals to rebuild it before and after the '45 came to nothing apart from leaving arguably conjectural plans for a measure of restoration. This fourth context for the castle - as a

feature of the Jacobite era - continues the pattern of a shadowier and shadowier role as each successive context evolved.

15.5 It was stated that the fifth context is in a sense the castle's decisive comeback, albeit as a romantic ruin. Romantic is the operative word, though obviously the rise of the picturesque in the sensibilities of the educated 18th century mind laid the foundations of the later aesthetic. It is no accident that the very functional work of that quintessentially Enlightenment draughtsman Paul Sandby, includes a fine view of the picturesque ruin which was the contemporary Castle Tioram. Sir Walter Scott, another Enlightenment rationalist, and devoted Unionist, then supercharged the remains of feudal and clanned authority in Scotland, both by his day obsolete, with two concepts, expressed powerfully in his wildly successful novels. One was conservative nostalgia for a stable social order in the turmoil of the early industrial revolution. The other was a sense of the tragic position of historic figures caught between an old world to which they were committed by honour, conviction and loyalty, and a new one inevitably destined to destroy all they loved. This sensibility evolved first in the Borders, where abandoned feudal keeps, and romantic abbey ruins abounded - symbols of a lifestyle that had died after 1603, and a faith dethroned in 1560 respectively. It then spread, on the back of Scott's 'Lady of the Lake', to the Trossachs, and it was logical that it would spread into the rest of the Highlands. Economically, this phenomenon was vastly important, because it was the basis for the creation and growth of the modern Scottish tourist industry.

15.6 Ruins were very important in the development of a sensibility that valued architecture not so much for its utility or elegance, as for its literary associations and the emotions that those associations could invoke. For readers of the wildly popular Gothic romances, for example, reaching out for associations with a vanished world of feudalism and faith, it has been said that 'the ideal house was, if not a complete ruin, at least a building so structurally unsound as to be quite uninhabitable'. Compromises were sought, ranging from the pseudo-medieval folly in the garden, to tourism to places with appropriate ruined sites. Here the new sensibilities were building on much older traditions of revering the ruins of classical antiquity. From the 14th century, wealthy Italians would commission a Ruin Room painted with murals of classical buildings in decay. Scots aristocrats joined the rest of the Georgian British ruling class in including a Grand Tour in their education. An essential part of it was visiting the great ruins of ancient Rome.

15.7 It was stated that romanticism accelerated the development of a new relationship, not just with medieval ruins, but also with wild untamed scenery. With real romantic sensibility commonplace by the mid-19th century that group of early seaboard castles on the West Coast of Scotland became very important icons for a whole group of painters. The castles were symbols of many lost causes and worlds and were surrounded by fantastic scenery, because when they were built accessibility by land hardly mattered. Horatio McCulloch, Scotland's most popular Victorian landscape painter is only one example of the artists who both exploited and built up such sensibilities painting Castle Tioram and similar sites. He even painted what seems to have been a generic West Highland castle rising from a rock in the waves and surrounded by wonderful mountain scenery, as so many of the real ones are.

15.8 It was stated that Castle Tioram is a Scottish icon within the recognised Romantic theme of 'Ruins in a Landscape'. This theme evolved from the picturesque 18th

century folly, such as the Hermitage near Dunkeld, originally with its very own bogus hermit, into the ideologically heavily charged iconography of the European Romantic movement. Much of the foundations for these later developments on the Continent and in America were laid in Scotland. Much of what is central to Scottish landscape art in the 19th century only makes sense in terms of the Scottish Victorian response to these developments. Since the early 17th century, it is arguable that the castle's role in these movements of thought and art has been by far the most significant part it has played since its original role became obsolete after 1603.

15.9 As well as a document in stone the castle as it stands is a most important document in the history of the development of landscape painting in Scotland. Its existence in its present state was one of the factors which helped to create the image of the Highlands which even in an age when tourism and the cutting edge of serious art have ceased to move in step, is a fundamental prop of the Scottish tourist industry. It therefore has a right to exist as a hugely significant ruin in a landscape. As such, it is an important part of the Scottish heritage which we would be bound to lose if it were to be subject to radical reconstruction on an inevitably partially conjectural basis.