

Published
Seven Times
a Year



The



\$1.50 a copy \$10.50 a year

HIGHLANDER



VOL. 25
NO. 1
JAN/FEB 1987

The Magazine of Scottish Heritage

Ruffling Their Feathers

By Sir Crispin Agnew of Lochnaw Bt, Rothesay Herald of Arms

Who wears what feathers is always a matter of dispute and a matter of honour. It is a difficult subject, because the wearing of eagle's feathers is a matter of convention and not of law, so there are no strict rules regulating the matter and no sanctions except perhaps social against the person who wears more feathers than he is entitled to sport. The wearing of adornments in head dress is a well known phenomena throughout the world. One need point to no more than the head feathers of the red indian chiefs and in particular to the well respected Waldo E. McIntosh, former Principal Chief of the Creek Nation who often combines his two heritages with highland dress and his chiefly headdress of full feathers. The more important the personage the more impressive the adornment of his head dress.

The use of insignia on the bonnet is a useful means of identification especially in battle. Knights wore their crests or feather plumes on their helmets and clansmen would wear their clan plant badge in their bonnet as a mark of their affiliation. This tradition is continued by the wearing of regimental cap badges in headdress or by the wearing of a coloured plume of feathers, which are more easily spotted at a distance. There are the white feathers of the Royal Highland Fusiliers, the red of the Black Watch and the blue of the Queens Own Highlanders. However, it was the leader who needed a more distinctive marker to stand out "head and shoulders" above his followers and I suspect that it was for this reason that chiefs perhaps wore eagle's feathers, which would stand out above the fighting crowd and act as a rallying point for their men.

There are early examples of a chief with feathers in his bonnet, although the use of three eagle's feathers for chiefs seems to date from the late 18th century, after the act of 1782, which repealed the act which prohibited the wearing of highland dress. The portrait of a "Highland Chieftain" in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery circa 1660 said by the late Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that ilk to be of the 1st Earl of Breadalbane shows a plume of white feathers and the 6th Laird of Ardour

is named *Eoghan-na-Hiteach*. By the 1800s portraits appear with chiefs wearing the now traditional three eagle's feathers. Raeburn's portrait of The MacGregor is probably the best known, although it is interesting that his contemporaneous portrait of Glengarry shows only a plume of feathers.

Against this background, let us look at the conventions as they are understood today. The Sovereign as "Chief of Chiefs" or *Ardrioh* is entitled to wear four eagle's feathers, and on occasions sovereigns have done so as seen in the portrait of George II by Raeburn.

High Chiefs of the Clan Donald, the Clan Stewart and the Clan Chattan are entitled to wear three eagle's feathers.

Chiefs of clans and names are entitled to wear three eagle's feathers. There is no doubt about this category because they will have, or can have, a matriculation from the Lord Lyon wherein they are officially recognised as "Chief of the Name and Arms of X" or alternatively as "Chief of the Honourable Clan X".

The full chiefs of the Clan Donald, Clan Stewart and Clan Chattan who command clans which are part of those great royal clans or confederations, such as MacDonald of Clanranald or of Keppoch, Stuart of Bute or The MacKintosh are entitled to wear three eagle's feathers. The full chiefs of the Clan Donald and Clan Chattan are well known, but the principal chiefs of the Clan Stewart have perhaps not been fully defined.

More difficulty exists in the category of Chiefs of substantial branches of a Clan. Chiefs of Branch Clans are officially recognised by the Lord Lyon as "Chief of the Name and Arms of X of Y" or "Chief of the Honourable Clan X of Y". The territorial designation "of Y" indicates that the chief is not chief of the whole clan, but is just chief of a substantial branch. Chiefs in this category would include Fraser of Lovat, Nicolson of Scorrybreac, MacLeod of the Lewes, MacLaine of Lochbuie and the Campbells of Breadalbane and Cawdor etc. The full range of who is a branch chief as opposed to a substantial chieftain has never been clearly defined. Whether chiefs of these branch clans should wear

three eagles feathers or not is perhaps a grey area. I know that many do wear three eagle's feathers and I do know that it is the Lord Lyon's view that such branch chiefs, unless they represent substantial branch clans, which are and have been very independent of the principal chief should perhaps wear only two eagle's feathers.

Turning to the category of two eagle's feathers, the eldest son and heir apparent or the heir presumptive (ie the next heir where there is not an eldest son, such as brother, uncle or cousin) of a chief, who wears three eagle's feathers are entitled to wear two eagle's feathers.

Chieftains of Clans, that is to say heads of the principal branches of a clan, who have been long recognised as owning or formerly owning a substantial part of the clan lands are entitled to wear two eagle's feathers. These are the lairds of the clan, the principal cadets, who in times of war

panies under the overall command of the clan chief. Again this is a difficult category to define, but it is probably true to say that the clan chief will know who are his principal cadets and chieftains, who fall into this category. Certain chieftains have been officially recognised as such by the Crown or by The Lord Lyon; viz William MacLennan, Chieftain of Clan MacLennan, The Chieftain of Dalkilry, Campbell of Invermeil. If you do not know or are not sure that you fall into this two feather category, it is probably right to say that you do not qualify as a chieftain of the clan. It is my opinion that a chief could recognise a person as falling into this category and confirm to them and their successors in that name and arms, the right to wear two eagle's feathers.

All gentlemen of the clan i.e. any person who has their own coat of arms is entitled to wear one eagle's feather. I should perhaps add the rider that this is a person who has their own Scottish

Continued on next page

coat of arms, because of course coats of arms granted by other jurisdictions are not recognised in Scotland as making you a gentleman of the clan. Thus neither an Armstrong with an English coat of arms nor a Californian Scot with a Spanish coat of arms, would be recognised as an armigerous members of their clans.

Finally there is the question of how many eagle feathers a Chief's Commissioner or Lieutenant etc. should wear. The Lord Lyon has suggested that it is appropriate for a Commissioner, when acting in his official capacity, to wear two eagles feathers within the territory for which he is Commissioner, because in that territory he is the equivalent of a chieftain of the clan. When appearing at any function as a private individual and not in his official capacity, he should of course only wear the number of feathers to which he is entitled, if any, in his private capacity.

Thus in the USA the Chief's principal representative by what ever name he is known may wear two eagle's feathers, when acting in his official capacity. Area Commissioners, or Deputy Commissioners appointed under the principal Commissioner may wear one eagle's feather as they hold a position similar to that of a gentleman of the clan. The Lord Lyon has suggested that such Commissioners or Deputy Commissioners should only wear their eagle's feathers within their own territory, but if they visit Scotland or another area (ie the USA Commissioner visiting Australia), they should not wear eagle's feathers unless they are attending an engagement of their own clan and have been authorised to wear those feathers at that engagement, by their chief. The reason for this is that outwith their own territory they have no status, because their commission only gives them and can only give them power within their jurisdiction. In contrast chiefs and chieftains have a status within their clans, wherever they are at the time.

It goes without saying that all chiefs, chieftains and gentlemen of the clan have their own coat of arms. They thus can wear their eagle feathers with their own crest within a plain circlet on which is inscribed their motto. If the person is a peer or baron he may cap the circlet with a coronet or baronial chapeau. While real eagle feathers are

and maybe worn it is also equally conventionally correct for the person to wear miniature eagle's feathers in silver.

Similarly, at their own pleasure it is equally correct to wear the chief's crest within a belt & buckle with the appropriate number of eagle feathers. In some ways this is better at clan gatherings because it emphasises the solidarity of the clan. Commissioners etc., when acting in their official capacity as the chiefs representative should wear his crest badge with their eagle feathers, indicating that they are acting as his clansmen, rather than their own crest within a plain circlet.

Finally I should add that there is nothing wrong with organised societies establishing an eagle feather code for their own organisation, provided the feathers are worn with the badge of that Society. Thus the Queen's Body Guard for Scotland (The Royal Company of Archers), the 4/5th Bn Seaforth Highlanders and the Caledonian Club of San Francisco wear eagle's feathers in their bonnets to indicate the rank of the official, by the number of feathers worn. It is probably right to say that it is correct for those who have long been used to having such a feather code, but it would be presumptuous for a new society, without some form of official sanction to presume to start a feather code at this stage.