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The Origins and Development of the »Highland Charge« c. 1560 to 1645

I.

In his important 1980 study entitled *Alasdair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the Seventeenth Century*, Dr. David Stevenson held that MacColla introduced a devastatingly effective new tactic called the »Highland charge« to battlefields in Ireland and Scotland¹. In 1990 Mr. Stuart Reid challenged this assertion by dismissing the »Highland charge« as insignificant when compared to conventional seventeenth-century tactics and calling the Highlanders »a half-armed, undisciplined mob«². Both these men indeed introduce some provocative arguments. On the one hand, as Dr. Stevenson contends, a good case can be made for MacColla's having introduced some sort of new attack tactics — the so-called »Highland charge« — into Scotland in 1644—45 that allowed the royalist army under James Graham, marquis of Montrose, to defeat several larger and better supplied government armies. On the other, Mr. Reid posits that the undisciplined Scottish Highlanders in the 1640s generally were not capable of successfully employing such intricate offensive tactics against government regulars and their Campbell allies. I agree, more or less, with both men on these general assertions, but further explanation is necessary if we are to properly understand the origins and development of tactical warfare in the Celtic fringe from c. 1560 to the 1640s.

MacColla indeed introduced a dynamic new tactical configuration from Ireland into Scotland in the 1640s that won at least five major victories for the royalists. It should not, however, be called the »Highland« but the »Irish« charge. This matter of nomenclature leads quite naturally into the second issue: Mr. Reid's claim that the Highlanders themselves were not proper instruments to carry out the charge. Up to a point he is correct. It was MacColla's Irish veterans (mainly men from Clan Donald's Irish branch, the Antrim Mac Donnells) who usually executed the tactics in question in 1644—45. However, Reid is mistaken in his implication that the Highland clans thereafter did not successfully adopt the charge from Killiecrankie (1689) to Culloden (1746).

It is my belief that an evolving Irish charge (in several variations) had become the centerpiece of Gaelic tactical warfare by the 1640s. To make my point, I will challenge Dr. Stevenson's thesis that the »Highland charge« originated in Ireland in the early 1640s under Alasdair MacColla. On the contrary, I believe (1) that certain important tactical elements of the »Highland charge« had already been developed in Gaelic Ulster and the western Highlands and Isles of Scotland from c. 1560 to 1600, and (2) that the charge's tactical principles and its execution underwent some important changes during the 1640s. Furthermore, I will challenge Mr. Reid on the grounds that most of the Highlanders were

¹ David Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla and the Highland Problem in the Seventeenth Century* (Edinburgh 1980), *passim*. See also, *idem*, »The Highland Charge«, *History Today*, 32 (August 1982), pp. 3—8.

² Stuart Reid, *The Campaigns of Montrose: A Military History of the Civil War in Scotland, 1639 to 1646* (Edinburgh 1990), p. 58 and *passim*.

capable troops without whom Montrose and MacColla could not have won their incredible run of victories in 1644–45. Moreover, though outside the scope of this article, there is no doubt that the Highlanders by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century had adapted the Irish charge to their own circumstances with a good deal of success against an increasingly effective British army.

II.

According to Dr. Stevenson, MacColla introduced the »Highland charge« at the battle of the Laney (Bendooragh) on 11 February 1642. While there is little doubt that MacColla used a rather primitive variant of the »Highland charge« on this occasion, it is unlikely that the tactic originated at the Laney. On the day of the battle Archibald Stewart of Ballintoy led a government contingent of between 600 and 950 Englishmen and Scots, including a troop of cavalry, from Coleraine to secure provisions so that the garrison there could hold out against the Irish Catholics until a relief force arrived from Scotland. Stewart was closely shadowed by a comparably-sized Catholic force of Irishmen and Highland Scots (600–700 men) under MacColla's command. MacColla laid an ambush for the enemy at the Laney (a mile or so outside Ballymoney in the Route), some of his lightly-armed Irish kerne drawing Stewart's men onto boggy ground where they were suddenly attacked by the Catholics' main force. According to what Dr. Stevenson calls »the most detailed account of the battle [that of Rev. Alexander Clogy]«, MacColla, »having commanded his murderers to lay down all their firearms [...] fell in amongst them (with swords and dirks) in such a furious and irresistible manner, that it was reported that not a man of them escaped of all the eight hundred³.«

Dr. Stevenson's contention that the Laney marked the first use of the »Highland charge« apparently is based on Rev. Clogy's account of MacColla's troops having thrown down their muskets before charging the enemy. Dr. Stevenson is forced to admit that »Nothing is said about their first having fired a volley, but this may be implicit in the statement.« He further notes that had MacColla »made his men put down their guns before battle commenced, it seems unlikely that the account of the battle would have mentioned that they abandoned the guns just before it describes their charge⁴. Other contemporary accounts fail to mention either the firing or casting away of muskets. One observed that »the Irish under the command of [...] MacColla, charged them [i.e. Stewart of Ballintoy's men] in boggy ground, and beat their horse in amongst their foot, and followed close in their rear, and without any great opposition took the rout, which was the ruin of most of them⁵.« Another chronicler simply noted that many of Stewart's Scots, »who ambi-

³ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), p. 82. Quote taken from E.S. Shuckburgh, ed., *Two Biographies of William Bedell, Bishop of Kilmore* (Cambridge 1902), pp. 173–4. For other accounts of the Battle of the Laney, see Rev. George Hill, *An Historical Account of the MacDonnells of Antrim* (Belfast 1873; reprint edn., Ballycastle 1978), pp. 69–70; *idem*, »The Stewarts of Ballintoy«, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, new series, 6 (1900), pp. 82, 87; E. Hogan, ed., *The History of the Warr of Ireland from 1641 to 1653. By a British Officer, of the Regiment of Sir John Clottworthy* (Dublin 1873), pp. 23–4; J. T. Gilbert, ed., *History of the Irish Confederation and the War in Ireland, 1841–9*, 7 vols. (Dublin 1882–91), vol. I, p. 33; Thomas Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Bloody Bridge and Other Papers Relating to the Insurrection of 1641* (Dublin 1903), p. 222.

⁴ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), p. 84.

⁵ Hogan, ed., *Warr of Ireland* (see fn. 3), pp. 22f.

tionated to have the van, perished miserably by a womanish fear without any manly reluctance⁶.« Nonetheless, Dr. Stevenson is probably correct in asserting that MacColla employed the »Highland charge« (albeit a somewhat primitive form of it) at the Laney. But Rev. Clogy's rather casual mention (and the other chroniclers' obvious neglect) of the casting away of firearm before charging suggests an implication of the sort that Dr. Stevenson seemingly has not entertained: that by 1642 the tactics of the Irish charge, as they had thus far evolved, were already familiar enough to most knowledgeable observers not to warrant special comment. If indeed such a thesis is plausible, the origins of the so-called »Highland charge« must be sought before the 1640s.

It may be argued that the Irish charge had its immediate origins in the second half of the sixteenth century after the introduction of firearms into the Gaelic periphery of the British Isles. Dr. Stevenson notes that »For Highland warriors to charge into battle was nothing new; the novelty of the classic »Highland charge« lay in a careful balance between the employment of the old [swords and targets] and the new [firearms]»⁷. Since the redoubtable *gallóglaigh* of the late middle ages, Highland Scottish troops had been known for their brutal frontal assaults with blade rather than missile weapons⁸. Dr. Stevenson is also right in his assessment of the »careful balance« between traditional and new weaponry. But this »novelty« came in the sixteenth rather than the seventeenth century with the employment of the arquebus, caliver, and matchlock musket on the battlefields of Scotland and Ireland. Dr. Stevenson tells his reader that in the 1640s the advantages of the musket, »that symbol of modern technology in warfare, [...] were recognised and exploited« by MacColla as an integral part of the »Highland charge«⁹. He contends that this assault tactic could not have originated before the middle of the seventeenth century because it was not until then that the musket became available to large numbers of Gaelic Scots and Irish¹⁰.

Yet there is ample evidence to suggest that firearms were increasingly numerous in the Gaelic periphery during the sixteenth century. They were first used in Ireland at the battle of Knockdoe in 1504; a Galway ordinance of 1517 prohibited the sale of guns, ammunition, and powder to the native Irish, a sure indication that there already was a thriving market for firearms in the island. The use of firearms became commonplace in Irish military units after 1550, and from there spread to Scottish »redshanks« (especially the MacDonnells/MacDonalds) in the 1560s. G.A. Hayes-McCoy held that »there were undoubtedly many more gunners present [at Farsetmore where the O'Donnells defeated the O'Neills in 1567] than at Knockdoe, gunners armed with the arquebus«¹¹. Two years earlier Shane O'Neill had defeated the Antrim MacDonnells at Glentaisie in a contest in which both armies were comprised of heavy infantry armed with swords and axes and light infantry armed with matchlock muskets. Though at Glentaisie and Farsetmore the outcome was decided by dint of sword rather than volleys of lead, firearms did play a significant role. Used by mobile skirmishers to harass the enemy before the heavy, sword-

⁶ Fitzpatrick, ed., *Bloody Bridge* (see fn. 3), p. 222.

⁷ Stevenson, »The Highland Charge« (see fn. 1), p. 4.

⁸ For information on the *gallóglaigh*, see G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces in Ireland (1565–1603)* (Dublin 1937); Andrew McKerral, »West Highland Mercenaries in Ireland«, *Scottish Historical Review* 30 (April 1951), pp. 1–14; James Michael Hill, »The Distinctiveness of Gaelic Warfare, 1400–1750«, *European History Quarterly* 22 (1992), pp. 323–45.

⁹ Stevenson, »The Highland Charge« (see fn. 1), p. 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Irish Battles* (London, 1969), pp. 58, 77, 82 (quote).

wielding infantry made their attack, the role of firearms in the 1560s was not fundamentally unlike that which they were to play in the »Highland charge« of the 1640s¹².

Hugh O'Neill's uprising from 1595 to 1603 witnessed a tremendous increase in the use of firearms by the Irish and the employment of something akin to Dr. Stevenson's »Highland charge«. Much like MacColla's Irish veterans a half century later, O'Neill's men commonly employed the musket only in the initial stages of battle; the sword provided the final blow. Despite O'Neill's relegation of firearms to a secondary tactical role, he nonetheless went to great lengths to ensure a steady supply of munitions from England, Lowland Scotland, and the continent. At the outset of his rising, O'Neill could field over 4,000 men armed with muskets and calivers¹³. The tactics O'Neill used to defeat the English at Yellow Ford in 1598 are in some ways similar to those employed by the Irish and their Highland allies in the 1640s. At Yellow Ford the Irish disorganized Sir Henry Bagenal's columns with desultory gunfire before staging a furious charge at the battle's climax. While O'Neill's prolonged, random musket fire differed from the single volley of the post-1642 Irish charge, the basic roles of missile and blade weapons at Yellow Ford and the contests fought by the Irish and Highlanders during the War of the Three Kingdoms were virtually identical. In both instances firearms were used at the outset to break up the enemy's ranks, subsequent to a brutal charge that decided the issue by close quarter combat¹⁴. This of course does not mean that the »Highland charge« as described by Dr. Stevenson had already been developed by the Irish in the 1590s; rather, it simply suggests that similar Gaelic Irish attack tactics based in part on the use of firearms can be identified much earlier than MacColla's day.

There is little doubt that the use of firearms was more widespread in Ireland than in Gaelic Scotland in the sixteenth century. However, gunpowder weapons were more available in the western Highlands and Isles than Dr. Stevenson suggests¹⁵. Firearms not only found their way to the Highlands from numerous gun manufacturers and an expanding arms import market in the Lowlands¹⁶, but from Ireland as well. During the first half of the century there began a heavy traffic of itinerant Scottish »redshank« mercenaries back and forth across the North Channel. Associated mainly with the MacDonnells of northeastern Ulster, whose increasing domination after 1550 of the Kintyre-Islay-Antrim triangle provided a political and military link between the Highlands and Ireland, these infantry troops increased the flow of firearms, powder, and shot directly into the west of Scotland¹⁷.

There are numerous examples illustrating the popularity of firearms among Highland clans and »Highland line« families at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. In 1590 the earl of Huntly is said to have had in his entourage »ar-

¹² J. Michael Hill, »Shane O'Neill's Campaign Against the MacDonnells of Antrim, 1564–5«, *Irish Sword* 18, no. 71 (Summer 1991), pp. 129–38; *idem*, *Fire and Sword: Sorley Boy MacDonnell and the Rise of Clan Ian Mor, 1538–1590* (London 1993), chapter five; *idem*, *Celtic Warfare, 1595–1763* (Edinburgh 1986; reprint edn., Godstone, Surrey 1993), chapter three; *idem*, »Distinctiveness of Gaelic Warfare« (see fn. 8), pp. 331–2.

¹³ Hill, *Celtic Warfare* (see fn. 12), pp. 22–4; Hayes-McCoy, *Irish Battles* (see fn. 11), pp. 110–12.

¹⁴ Hill, *Celtic Warfare* (see fn. 12), pp. 27–30; Hayes-McCoy, *Irish Battles* (see fn. 11), pp. 106–31.

¹⁵ Stevenson, »The Highland Charge«, p. 4.

¹⁶ Keith M. Brown, *Bloodfeud in Scotland, 1573–1625: Violence, Justice and Politics in an Early Modern Society* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 22; David Caldwell, »Royal Patronage of Arms and Armour Making«, in David Caldwell, ed., *Scottish Weapons and Fortifications, 1100–1800* (Edinburgh 1981), p. 82.

¹⁷ Hill, *Fire and Sword* (see fn. 12), *passim*.

tailleire« and several »hagbut[s]« (a type of musket)¹⁸. At the battle of Glenlivet (Ben Rinn) in 1594, the earl of Argyll »had in his company to the number of sax thowsand men, weill provided with muscatis, bowis, arrowis, and twa-handit swordis; of the quhilk number there were fyftene hundreth muscateirs and hagbutters«¹⁹. The opposition force, under the earls of Huntly and Errol, had both personal firearms and artillery — »foure pieces of carted ordinance [...] and an hundreth hacquebutters« — which it used against Argyll with great effect²⁰. Indeed, the carrying of firearms was so commonplace among Scots, especially those families prone to engage in frequent feuds, that James VI and I resorted to various gun-control measures to quell endemic violence²¹. A royal commission appointed in 1608 to bring under control the western Highlands and Isles demanded that the clansmen abstain from using firearms of any sort, carrying instead only single-handed broadswords and targets²². In the following year the famed Statutes of Iona (1609) gave further voice to the government's policy to disarm the Highlanders²³. Such attempts to reduce the availability of firearms to Scottish Highlanders clearly had not borne fruit by the time of the Dunyveg MacDonalds' Islay uprising in 1615. It was reported that the stronghold of Dunyveg Castle was »well provyded with pulder [powder] [...] and bullott whereof thay fand good store«²⁴.

Dr. Stevenson's contention that the »Highland charge« could not have originated before the 1640s because of the unavailability of sufficient firearms in the Gaelic periphery is simply not supported by evidence; neither is his similar assertion regarding the single-handed broadsword. He holds that the charge did »not appear before the seventeenth century because in earlier generations the Highlanders did not have [...] the single-handed sword and the targe or target«²⁵. Evidence suggests that both two-handed and single-handed swords were quite common in sixteenth-century Ireland. A c. 1550 woodcut in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum depicts several Irish chieftains armed with single-handed swords, as do a series of colored drawings (c. 1560s–1570s) by the Flemish artist, Lucas de Heere. John Derrick's famous woodcuts from the 1580s also show the Irish carrying swords much

¹⁸ Scottish History Society, *The Calendar of Fearn: Text and Additions, 1471–1667*, ed. R. J. Adams (Edinburgh 1991), no. 200, p. 145.

¹⁹ Bannatyne Club, ed., *The Historie and Life of King James the Sext: Being an Account of the Affairs of Scotland, from the Year 1566 to the Year 1596; with a Short Continuation to the Year 1617* (Edinburgh 1991), p. 338.

²⁰ »Battle of Glenrinneis«, in David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh 1842), V, pp. 348–52 (quote from p. 352); Sir Robert Gordon, *A Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland* (Edinburgh 1813), p. 226; Bannatyne Club, ed., *King James the Sext*, pp. 338–43; David Moyses, *Memoirs of the Affairs of Scotland from 1577 to 1603*, ed. Bannatyne and Maitland clubs (Edinburgh 1830), pp. 119–21; Great Britain, *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547–1603*, ed. J. Bain et al (Edinburgh 1898–1969), XI, pp. 456–60 (hereafter cited as *CSP Scot.*); »Battle of Balrinnes«, in Spottiswoode Society, ed., *The Spottiswoode Miscellany* (Edinburgh 1844–5), I, pp. 261–70; J. Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh 1830), II, pp. 458–60; Donald Gregory, *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh 1881), pp. 257–9.

²¹ Brown, *Bloodfeud* (see fn. 16), pp. 21–2, 205, 247; Great Britain, *The Acts of the Parliament of Scotland*, ed. T. Thomson and C. Innes, 12 vols. (Edinburgh 1814–75), III, pp. 112–14, 164–5, 230–1 (hereafter cited as *APS*); *idem*, *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, ed. J. H. Burton et al, 38 vols. (Edinburgh 1877–1970), III: 278, VI: 258, VIII: 37 (hereafter cited as *RPCS*).

²² *RPCS* (see fn. 21), VIII, pp. 59–73; Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles* (see fn. 20), p. 319.

²³ *RPCS* (see fn. 21), IX: 29.

²⁴ Scottish History Society, *Highland Papers*, ed. J. R. N. MacPhail (Edinburgh 1920), III, pp. 142.

²⁵ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), p. 83. See also *idem*, »The Highland Charge« (see fn. 1), p. 4.

like those presented by Heere and contained in the Ashmolean. Moreover, there exists in the British Library a specimen of a sixteenth-century single-handed claymore (*claidbeamh-mor*) found in the river Bann. The standard two-handed claymore, similar to the *Zweihänder* used by the Swiss and Germans, evidently had been introduced into Ireland by the *galloglaigh* during the late middle ages. However, it is unlikely that large, two-handed Scottish swords were adopted by the Irish in great numbers²⁶.

After 1560 even Scottish redshank heavy infantry operating in Ireland had already started to abandon the heavy claymore in favor of the single-handed broadsword and target. In a 1581 letter written by Nicholas Malby, governor of Connacht, he describes a 300-man redshank force consisting of nearly 200 troops armed with single-handed swords and bucklers and about 100 carrying what seem to be claymores²⁷. Upon closely examining the gravestone slabs that proliferated the western Highlands and Isles of Scotland in the sixteenth century, one finds depicted on them a predominance of single-rather than double-handed weapons²⁸. In 1608 the Scottish Parliament hoped to persuade the Highlanders to abandon firearms in favor of the single-handed broadsword and target, a sure indication of the wide availability of the latter weapons²⁹. During a 1617 visit to the Highlands, Rev. Richard James reported that the clansmen carried »a long basket hilt sworde«, an observation that could only have applied to a single-handed weapon³⁰. James's »description of the arms of the Highlanders«, writes Claude Blair, »indicates that the basket-guard was in general use among them in the early seventeenth century, and it is reasonable to assume that it was not then a recent innovation«³¹.

III.

To better appreciate Montrose's and MacColla's striking victories based on the offensive shock power of the Irish charge, it is necessary to look briefly at some salient elements of western European warfare from c. 1590 to 1640. During that half century Maurice of Nassau and Gustavus Adolphus instituted numerous »modern« military reforms. But most of these reforms, when put into practice on the battlefield, resulted in increased defensive rather than offensive capabilities. Maurice showed linear alignments to be more mobile and flexible than the widely-adopted Spanish *tercio* formation, while Gustavus advocated the salvo to blast openings in the enemy line in preparation for a pike attack. But neither the linear formation nor the salvo (nor a combination of the two) could provide the degree of striking power necessary to cause a revolution in offensive tactics. Linear formations were not inherently structured to favor offensive tactics, as Maurice frequently demonstrated by arraying his lines solely for defensive purposes. Gustavus sought to combine formational flexibility (reducing the Maurician 10-deep line to one that was only six-deep),

²⁶ G. A. Hayes-McCoy, *Sixteenth Century Irish Swords in the National Museum of Ireland* (Dublin 1977), pp. 18–20, 27, 45, 49.

²⁷ Public Record Office (PRO), London, State Papers, Ireland, Elizabeth, 63/81/42/i.

²⁸ Hayes-McCoy, *Irish Swords* (see fn. 26), pp. 51f.

²⁹ *RPCS*, VIII: 59–73; Gregory, *Western Highlands and Isles* (see fn. 20), p. 319.

³⁰ Rev. Richard James, »Description of Shetland, Orkney, and the Highlands of Scotland«, in E. MacGillivray, ed., *Orkney Miscellany* (Edinburgh 1953), I, p. 51.

³¹ Claude Blair, »The Early Basket-Hilt in Britain«, in Caldwell, ed., *Scottish Weapons* (see fn. 16), p. 157.

firepower, and shock power, and certainly he was more successful offensively than Maurice. However, as Michael Roberts notes, Gustavus's »battle tactics depended upon intimate and disciplined co-operation between firearms and cold steel«. There was, he continues, »to be a rhythmical alternation of discharge and charge; and the role of the shot was not to win victories, but to prepare the way for the hand-to-hand encounter which alone could win them«³².

The requisite coordination of missile and blade weapons indeed proved difficult for Gustavus to achieve. At Wallhof (1626) and Dirschau (1627) he did succeed in blasting the enemy into disorder with an effective musket salvo, after which his sword-wielding cavalry scattered the remnant³³. But against sterner opposition (e.g. Nordlingen, 1634), and especially when the Swedes employed their pikemen rather than cavalry as the principal attackers, such simply executed tactics could not always be counted on to triumph. After the opening salvo, the problem was three-fold: (1) the advance of the pikemen was likely to be quite slow; (2) because of the nature of the weapon itself, the attack had to be staged in linear formation across a wide expanse of ground (columnar alignment was not practical for a pike attack), thus diluting its shock effect; (3) once the attack was under-way the musketeers and artillery would be unable to keep pace, especially if cavalry were involved and moving faster than at a trot. Thus Dr. Roberts' »disciplined co-operation« and »rhythmical alternation of discharge and charge« generally proved to be an unattainable goal even for the great Swede and his successors.

When Mr. Reid posits that Montrose and MacColla achieved their victories mainly through the use of conventional seventeenth-century tactics, he presupposes that Maurice's and Gustavus's tactical reforms (1) generally were effective and (2) could be adopted specifically for offensive purposes by the royalist army. Neither point is correct. As before, the tactical changes wrought by Maurice and Gustavus were of limited value for the conduct of offensive warfare. Moreover, the royalist commanders in Scotland, while certainly aware of these reforms, in no way sought to substitute them for traditional Gaelic tactics. In order to determine whether the Irish charge »actually had the impact now claimed for it«³⁴, we must examine in some detail the royalist campaign in Scotland in 1644–45.

The battles of Tippermuir and Aberdeen in 1644 witnessed a somewhat less complicated version of the Irish charge than would be seen at Inverlochy in early 1645. From both contemporary accounts and recent reconstructions of the battle, it is clear that confusion reigned on both sides at Tippermuir. Mr. Reid, closely following the account of Patrick Gordon of Ruthven, contends that »Both sides engaged in a firefight which the rebels won in short order, and followed up with a physical assault on an already beaten and retreating enemy«³⁵. »This picture of Tippermuir suggests that neither MacColla's veteran Irish troops in the center nor the less disciplined Highlanders on the wings staged anything remotely resembling the »Highland charge«. However, Dr. Stevenson, supported by Rev. George Wishart's account, tells his reader that MacColla's Irish attacked after a single musket volley, but did not form into the clusters or wedges that later characterized the Irish charge«³⁶.

³² Michael Roberts, *Gustavus Adolphus*, 2nd edn. (London and New York 1992), p. 105.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁴ Reid, *Campaigns of Montrose* (see fn. 2), p. 58.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54; Patrick Gordon of Ruthven, *A Short Abridgement of Britane's Distemper from the yeare of God 1639 to 1649*, ed. John Dunn (Aberdeen 1844), p. 74.

³⁶ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), pp. 128, 134; Rev. George Wishart, *Memoirs of James, Marquis of Montrose*, ed. A.B. Murdoch and H.F.M. Simpson (Edinburgh 1893), p. 61.

Dr. Stevenson is careful to point out that it was only the center of the royalist army that carried out what he called »Alasdair's tactics«; he makes no claim that the Highlanders on Montrose's right wing used the »Highland charge«³⁷.

It is my contention that neither Dr. Stevenson nor Mr. Reid is completely correct in his depiction of Tippermuir. The battle appears to have witnessed some type of pre-determined assault tactics, especially by MacColla in the royalist center. But it is doubtful whether we should call these tactics *the* »Highland (or Irish) charge«, thus implying that it was introduced fully developed into Scotland in 1644. If this method of attack deserves the appellation »Highland (or Irish) charge«, we indeed must note that the tactic had by no means assumed its final form at Tippermuir. For his part, Mr. Reid's assertion that nothing out of the ordinary occurred in the center of the fight is simply not supported by the evidence. His case for a traditional firefight depends solely on a rather questionable interpretation of Ruthven's statement: »But the Covenanting army being all composed of untried men, and fresh water soldiers, never before used to martial discipline, were at the first encounter with the Irishes, played upon with hot alarms and *continual fire* [my italics]³⁸.« That the Covenanting levies were »untried men« suggests that they would not have been disciplined enough to engage in even a brief firefight at relatively close quarters (the effective range of a mid-seventeenth century matchlock musket was no more than sixty yards) with an enemy who had recourse to an attack with blade weapons. Moreover, a close reading of Ruthven's account of the Highland assault on the right wing suggests that the royalists were woefully short of powder and shot, thus making the prospect of a firefight all the more unlikely. He writes that the Highlanders, »from the higher ground, descended courageously, first, with muskets, *then* [my italics] with their swords assailed both horse and footmen«³⁹. It is probable that the Highlanders (and the Irish in the center) were so short of powder and ammunition that they could fire but one round each before resorting to other means of combat. In the case of the Highlanders on Montrose's right, that first was stones and then, when at close quarters, swords. MacColla's Irish in all likelihood also fired one round, drew their swords, and launched an all-out attack on the panicked covenanters.

Aberdeen, like Tippermuir, witnessed some sort of pre-determined attack tactics carried out by MacColla's Irishmen. But once again, it is questionable whether this deserves to be called the »Highland charge«. Dr. Stevenson believes that MacColla's Irishmen attacked at Aberdeen much as they had done in the previous battle.⁴⁰ However, unlike at Tippermuir, the Irish were unable to quickly overpower the covenanters. By most accounts, then, Aberdeen was not decided by the type of sudden and powerful shock tactics that characterized the traditional Irish charge. Ruthven observed that some 100 Irish musketeers on the right wing of the royalist army blunted two covenanter attacks (the last made by a troop of lancers) by giving »such continual fire as they [the covenanters] found that service too hot for them, and therefore made a retreat«⁴¹. The Irish on Montrose's right did eventually attack the enemy, driving them from the field; however, it is clear from Ruthven's account that the initial stage of the battle on the royalist right was determined by superior Irish defensive firepower. In the center, where most of MacColla's Irish were stationed, battle

³⁷ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), p. 128.

³⁸ Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), p. 74.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), p. 134.

⁴¹ Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), p. 81.

was joined when a troop of covenanting cavalry tried to drive home a determined assault. The Irish (according to Ruthven) coolly opened their ranks and absorbed the attack, pouring musket fire upon the surrounded enemy troopers⁴². Thus on both the royalist right and in the center, we see the Irish, rather than launching the »Highland charge«, standing their ground and repelling covenanter attacks before finally taking the offensive themselves.

Both Dr. Stevenson and Mr. Reid point out that the fighting was of much longer duration than Tippermuir, but they account for this differently. On the one hand, Dr. Stevenson writes that the »prolonged fighting with sword and dirk after the charge of the Irish demonstrated that they were capable of pressing home their attack even after the initial impetus of the charge had failed to rout the enemy«⁴³. On the other, Mr. Reid writes: »The fact that this phase of the fighting [i. e. when the two »battles« or main bodies joined battle in the center] seems to have been of comparatively long duration clearly points to there having been a heavy firefight«⁴⁴.« Thus the two men disagree about the nature of the prolonged combat that decided the battle. As with Tippermuir, Stevenson attributes the royalist victory to the hand-to-hand fighting skills of the Irish, and Reid to the disciplined use of musketry by MacColla's troops. Again, I believe that the answer lies somewhere in between.

Clearly, the unfolding of the battle of Aberdeen suggests that Montrose and MacColla were prepared to deflect a covenanter assault rather than launch the »Highland charge« against a numerically-superior enemy that was much better trained than the raw recruits who had fled at Tippermuir. But once the covenanters had spent themselves making futile attacks against the royalist line, the Irish and Highlanders were quick to take full advantage of the enemy's disorganization. The prolonged melee that followed contained tactical elements that indeed resemble Dr. Stevenson's »Highland charge«; however, one must remember that the success of the royalist offensive at Aberdeen ultimately was predicated on the judicious employment of defensive firepower to first blunt covenanter attacks on the right and center of the line. Thus Montrose and MacColla were able to meld two entirely different tactical elements — a primitive form of the »Irish charge« and conventional seventeenth-century musket tactics — into a type of warfare unique on western European battlefields in 1644.

The battle of Inverlochy (1645) gives us our first look at what properly might be termed the »Highland« or Irish charge. There the Irish royalists, posted on the wings rather than in the center, were ordered to hold their fire until within extremely close range of the enemy (perhaps as close as 10–15 yards). The Irish were cautioned against firing too soon in response to the enemy's fire, lest they dilute the shock effects of the musket shot and black powder smoke. If, as Dr. Stevenson contends, MacColla developed the »Highland charge«, it was at Inverlochy rather than the Laney (1642) where he first employed it. Still, however, we find no mention of the clusters of wedges that characterize later forms of the charge⁴⁵.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

⁴³ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), p. 134.

⁴⁴ Reid, *Campaigns of Montrose* (see fn. 2), pp. 68f. Reid is supported in his contention by Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), p. 82, and John Spalding, *Memorialls of the Trubles in Scotland and in England, A.D. 1624–A.D. 1645*, 2 vols., ed. Spalding Club (Aberdeen 1850–1), II, p. 406.

⁴⁵ Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), p. 101; Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), pp. 156–7; Michael Hill, »Killiecrankie and the Evolution of Highland Warfare«, *War in History*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1994): 125–39.

Inverlochy, Mr. Reid asserts, at first glance, »would appear to have been a classic example of the vaunted »Highland charge« in action, but [...] such a simplistic view does not stand up under close examination⁴⁶.« On the contrary, such a view does hold up. While contemporary accounts of the battle are sketchy, they do, upon close reading, reveal another vital tactical element of the Irish charge—the effective employment of swords and targets to finish off a confused enemy. After the point blank volley given by MacColla's veterans, they drew their swords, and »leaping in amongst them [Campbell of Auchinbreck's regulars] [...], they quickly put them to disorder⁴⁷.« Still Mr. Reid is reluctant to term this the »Highland charge«. He most assuredly is correct when he attributes the royalist victory to the performance of the Irish on the wings, though the Highlanders in the center did acquit themselves well against Argyll's Campbell militia. But his argument that the royalist army »won because they were better handled« unfortunately is left undeveloped. In an age where the »handling« of troops largely meant properly preparing them for battle (training, logistics, etc.) and then securing some sort of pre-attack advantage (the high ground, the sun or weather to one's back, etc.), it is unrealistic to expect commanders to have been able to direct troops once they were committed to the attack. If direction could be supplied at all in offensive operations, it usually took the form of commanders leading their men into the fray. Mr. Reid seems to suggest that the royalists were better »handled« at Inverlochy because they won the battle solely with firepower (which of course suggests a disciplined approach) instead of with a combination of firepower and cold steel (the latter suggesting the impetuous tactics of the Irish charge). He notes that »Ruthven says that the Irish fell on with sword and targe, but given their close proximity to the government troops it is unlikely that there would have been time to discard muskets, unsling targes and draw swords⁴⁸.«

Though Ruthven's account of the fighting at Inverlochy suggests otherwise, Reid attributes the royalist victory not to a variant of the Irish charge, but rather to the traditional use of infantry firepower. Moreover, he implies that if anything resembling Dr. Stevenson's »Highland charge« took place, it was carried out by the undisciplined »rabble of Highlanders in the centre«, who easily dispersed Argyll's similarly positioned »arrant scum«.« But in reality the Highlanders displayed a degree of discipline and order absent from their efforts at Tippermuir and Aberdeen⁴⁹. Indeed, Inverlochy shows that while MacColla's troops continued to provide the nucleus of the Irish charge in early 1645, the Highland clans were quickly adapting themselves to this form of tactical warfare.

Auldearn proved to be Montrose's and MacColla's most complex battle because of the defensive-offensive tactics employed by the royalists, and their most conventional, since, as Dr. Stevenson rightly contends, victory »owed little if anything to the Highland charge«⁵⁰. Rather, one key to winning the contest lay in MacColla's ability to dig in with 400 men and hold off a good part of the 4,000 covenanters under Major General Sir John Hurry until Montrose could rally the remainder of his small force, which apparently was not fully prepared for battle. At the time Auldearn was fought (May 1645), the royalist army consisted of only about 2,000 men, many of the Highlanders having gone home and the Irish units having been depleted by casualties. To offset these losses, however, Montrose

⁴⁶ Reid, *Campaigns of Montrose* (see fn. 2), p. 85.

⁴⁷ Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), p. 101.

⁴⁸ Reid, *Campaigns of Montrose* (see fn. 2), p. 87.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 176.

⁵⁰ Stevenson, »Highland Charge« (see fn. 1), p. 5.

had been joined by several hundred Gordon cavalry, who drove the enemy from the field at the battle's crucial moment, therefore providing the second key to victory. Thus the composition of the royalist army at Auldearn was quite different from previous battles, and this likely caused Montrose and MacColla initially to approach the contest with a more defensive-orientated tactical plan⁵¹.

As Hurry's covenanting army approached the village of Auldearn, MacColla took the royal standard and 400 of his Irish veterans and placed them slightly to the right of Montrose's main camp amidst »a marsh and some bushes, which was a strong ground«⁵². Though the dikes and ditches behind which MacColla's men were arrayed gave them a strong defensive position, covenanter attacks forced them to retreat twice. MacColla kept his troops in good order, however, and after loosing a particularly accurate musket volley the Irish suddenly charged the enemy, since, according to Dr. Stevenson, they »were not used to fight[ing] from defensive positions; the fighting they knew and excelled in was the charge and hand-to-hand combat in the open«⁵³. Mr. Reid concurs, stating that the Irish and Highlanders under MacColla were »temperamentally unsuited to fighting on the defensive«. However, he goes on to suggest that MacColla likely ordered a charge because his men were »ill-supplied with muskets, and not improbably short of ammunition«⁵⁴.

There is no question that MacColla's attack tactics at Auldearn bore little resemblance to the classic »Highland« or Irish charge. For one thing, MacColla's men occupied terrain that was particularly unsuited for the charge; the marshy ground slowed their progress and lessened the impact of the attack. For another, there is no account of royalist troops firing the characteristic musket volley before staging the assault with sword and target. As mentioned above, the blow that crushed Hurry's army was delivered by the Gordon cavalry: »My lord Gordon [...] charges the left wing, and that with a new form of fight, for he discharges all shooting of pistols and carabines [i.e. The »caracole« manoeuvre], only with their swords to charge [...] through their enemies«⁵⁵. Such tactics were highly irregular in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gaelic armies that usually had only a handful of cavalry troops. Thus Auldearn was quite different from previous battles in that the royalist's triumph resulted from MacColla's having used defensive tactics that drew (though perhaps inadvertently) the main body of the covenanter army onto ground that exposed it to a brutal attack by the Gordon cavalry that decided the day. If the Irish charge was carried out at all (for which there is little evidence), it figured only peripherally in the battle's outcome.

Kilsyth not only was the last royalist victory in Scotland during the War of the Three Kingdoms, it also was the most disorganized. That Montrose and MacColla lost control over their troops even before battle was joined obviously suggests that there was no formal Irish or »Highland charge«. However, the thorough confusion at Kilsyth did give the Irish and Highlanders ample opportunities to use their superior individual fighting skills at close quarters against the hapless covenanters. The sudden charge of the intemperate MacLean and MacDonald infantry without orders from either Montrose or MacColla might have been disastrous had not the covenanters themselves been executing a rather complicated manoeuvre from one side of the field to the other. As it turned out, the furious attack

⁵¹ Hill, *Celtic Warfare* (see fn. 12), pp. 55f., 59.

⁵² Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), p. 123.

⁵³ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), p. 182.

⁵⁴ Reid, *Campaigns of Montrose* (see fn. 2), p. 111.

⁵⁵ Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), pp. 125f.

won the day for the royalists, though not so easily as Dr. Stevenson would have his readers believe. While the disparity in casualties is noteworthy — a few hundred royalists compared to some 3,500 covenanters (about half their army) — it should be noted that at one point during the battle the Highlanders had been pinned down behind a stone wall by a withering fire from Lieutenant General William Baille's veteran musketeers. At that point the battle might have degenerated into a long distance musket duel, which the royalists most assuredly would have lost, had not the Gordon cavalry arrived to break the deadlock. Thereafter the Highlanders, now joined by MacColla's Irish, were able to resume the assault and quickly routed the enemy⁵⁶.

But if Dr. Stevenson is wrong in his belief that Kilsyth was a relatively easy royalist victory, Mr. Reid is surely in error when he disparages the performance of the Highlanders. Since it was his intention in *The Campaigns of Montrose* to »vigorously reassess« the role the Highlanders played in Montrose's battles, it is not surprising that Mr. Reid believes that they »were not after all very good soldiers«. Undisciplined though they were, the Highlanders nonetheless forced the covenanters to give battle at Kilsyth before they had realigned themselves on the left flank of Montrose's army, and this was the key to a royalist victory. Moreover, Mr. Reid errs by writing that »the famous highland charge had been stopped in its tracks« behind the stone wall by Baille's musketeers; on the contrary, it had not been attempted. Though assuredly unintentional, he does pay the Highlanders a compliment by pointing out how difficult it was »to resume an advance stalled behind solid cover«⁵⁷.

IV.

An examination of the five battles — Tippermuir, Aberdeen, Inverlochy, Auldearn, and Kilsyth — fought by Montrose and MacColla together (neither Alford nor Philiphaugh is included because of the absence of MacColla and most of his Irishmen) reveals a rather desultory use of what Dr. Stevenson identifies specifically as the »Highland charge«. That royalist offensive tactics varied, sometimes notably, from battle to battle suggests that the »Highland« or Irish charge was, for better or worse, in a state of flux in the 1640s. Indeed, if we take a broader view of the development of Gaelic tactics from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, we can see that MacColla was merely a contributor to (rather than the founder of) a systematic method of fighting that combined use of the traditional sword and target with new shoulder firearms. To be sure, both the quality and quantity of swords and muskets in the Celtic fringe improved significantly from 1560 to 1640. But the fundamental connection between technology and tactics changed little during the entire period and beyond, at least until about 1690 when the socket bayonet, flintlock musket, and increasingly mobile field artillery were introduced.

All this is not to say, however, that the Irish charge was inherently inflexible nor the Gaels resistant to beneficial change; the very fact that royalist offensive tactics varied from

⁵⁶ Stevenson, *Alasdair MacColla* (see fn. 1), pp. 210–12; Reid, *Campaigns of Montrose* (see fn. 2), pp. 146 f., 176; Wishart, *Memoirs of Montrose* (see fn. 36), 122–125; Ruthven, *Britane's Distemper* (see fn. 35), 139–45; Robert Baille, *Letters and Journals, 1637–1662*, 3 vols., ed. David Laing (Edinburgh 1841–42), II, pp. 420–4; William Forbes Leith, ed., *Memoirs of Scottish Catholics during the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*. 2 vols. (London 1909), I, p. 348.

⁵⁷ Reid, *Campaigns of Montrose* (see fn. 2), pp. 9, 90, 146.

one battle to the next in 1644–45 perhaps points up a degree of flexibility unique in early modern western European warfare. For example, Montrose and MacColla faced a number of Lowland Scots officers who, having served with Gustavus Adolphus in the 1620s and 1630s, introduced firing by salvo to Scottish battlefields. Gustavus is noted for having replaced firing by extraduction (i. e. a continuous fire, rank by rank) with firing by salvo, where all troops in a unit discharged their pieces at once. There is little question that the royalist commanders were aware that covenanting armies might employ either method of firing. That the actual configuration of Montrose's and MacColla's attacks differed, say, at Aberdeen and Inverlochy suggest that the royalists recognized the divergent uses of musketry by Robert Balfour, Lord Burleigh, at the former and the Campbell Earl of Argyll at the latter.

Dr. David Stevenson and Mr. Stuart Reid have given us valuable insights into the nature of the so-called »Highland charge«. But both men's perspectives are far too narrow. Neither has illustrated the problem of Gaelic tactical development broadly enough to show the origins and evolution of this rather simple but effective form of warfare. While the decade of the 1640s is the first example of the employment of the charge in a sustained campaign against conventional enemy armies, to ignore earlier, less notable, uses of a tactic that closely resembled the »Highland charge« is quite risky. Moreover, the historian who ends his close examination of the charge in the 1640s, thus implying that there were no changes worth noting over the next century, is also in error. To fully appreciate the remarkable accomplishments of the »Highland« or Irish charge against a rapidly modernizing English/British military establishment, it is necessary to view the 1640s as a crucial stage in the tactic's evolution, and not as its decade of origin and maturation⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ See Hill, »Distinctiveness of Gaelic Warfare« (see fn. 8), *passim*; *idem*, »Killiecrankie« (see fn. 45), *passim*. The author presently is at work on an article that takes the development of the Irish charge from 1645 to 1746.