

# A Highland Pistol by Hector McNeill of Mull, 1733

by *Stuart Maxwell*

During 1966 the Museum bought a scroll butt, steel pistol,<sup>1</sup> signed on the lock-plate 'HECTOR McNEIL MUL 20 APR 1733'. A letter in the Campbell of Stonefield Papers<sup>2</sup> reveals

<sup>1</sup> Sotheby's, 23rd May 1966 - lot 189.

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Record Office, GD 14/29.

that Hector McNeill was a 'Pistol maker in the Lands of Torlusk in Mull'. Unfortunately the letter, from Hector's brother, Neill, and dated 15th August 1745, gives no further information about his occupation; it does, however, give news of the great events of the day – that 'the King Charless is in Arasaig', that his standard is to be raised 'at Glenfinnin' on the 20th, and that 'he is to allow the present Church and State to rule and Govern the whole nation'. This the writer had 'from those that spoke eat and drank wt him since he becom a highland man', though he is in some doubt as to who is to be proclaimed King, Charles or his father. Neill also writes that 'Clanronald his regiment and Glengaries Regiment and some others is to be ordered to Argyllshire to raise the McNeills McDonalds and McAllisters there but they are not to molest any Campbels if they do not opose the Cause'. 'Let me know if the McLeans [of Mull, presumably] will raise in this Cause', he adds.

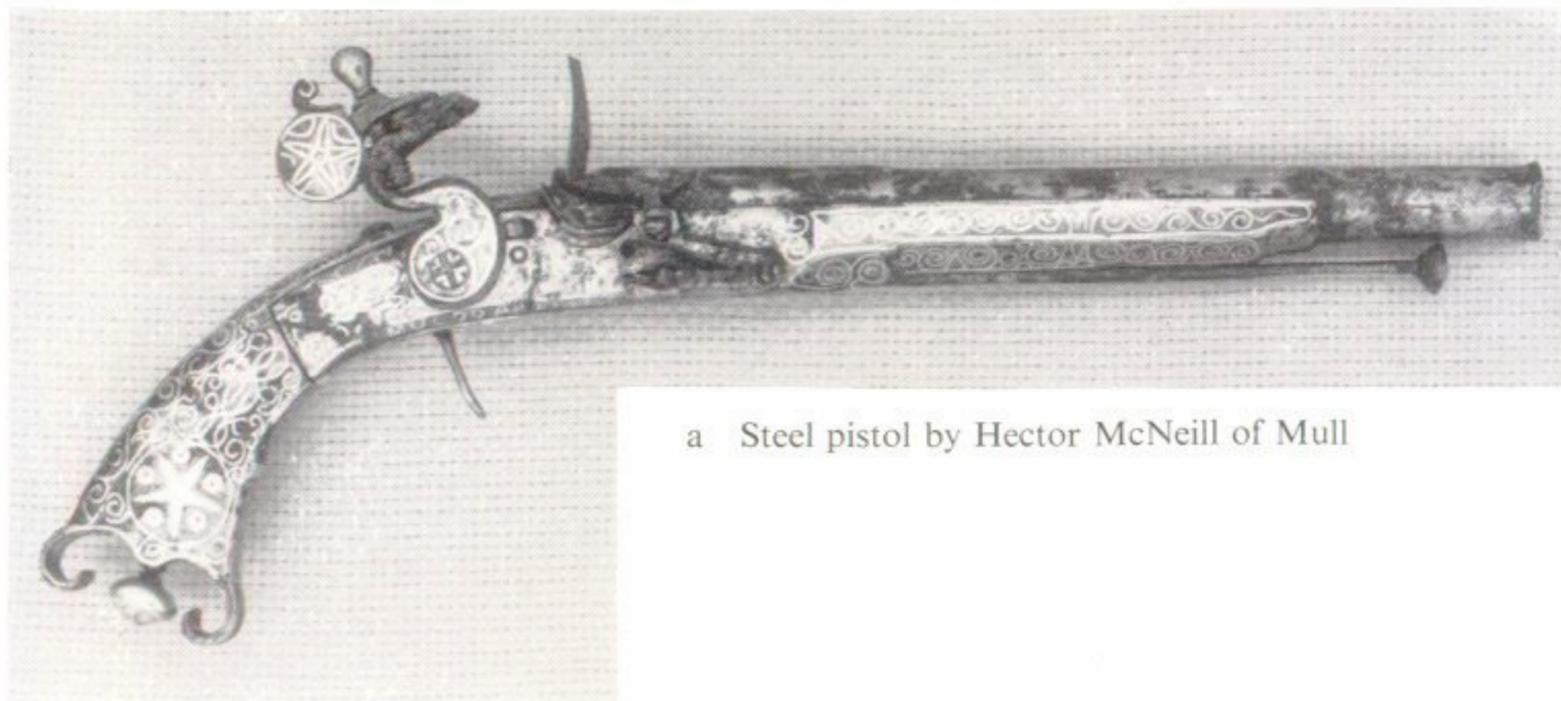
Most eighteenth-century highland pistols were made at Doune, some at Stirling and Dumbarton. It is surprising to find a maker so far from these centres as Torluisk in the island of Mull. The pistol is not in first-class condition, for the ball trigger is missing and the surface of the steel is much corroded in places. The silver inlay, however, is in good preservation and its pattern complete. The distinctive feature is the five-pointed star at the base of the butt. Several 'star' pistols are known – the earliest in the Museum is one by Thomas Caddell of Doune (LH 202) which must have been made in the early 1700s; others are by John Campbell, also of Doune (Colville Collection, FA 21), and an unsigned pistol (Colville Collection, FA 22). McNeill's pistol is nearer these than the earlier one in decoration; in fact, apart from the star it resembles pistols by the second Campbell, Alexander, in particular LH 293.

The decoration on pistols by Alexander Campbell and others around the middle of the century is the finest achievement of the scroll butt steel pistol makers. It is based on panels of simple, two strand interlace (found also on a few Stirling sword hilts), with open-ended loops intertwining it on each side, and on lines of scrollwork; these are carried out in silver inlay, as described by C. E. Whitelaw in *European Hand Firearms*.<sup>1</sup> The inlay is complemented by engraved decoration, mainly larger scrolls containing leaf-like patterns, the effect achieved by hatching. The unusual feature of Hector McNeill's pistol is that while his silver inlaid patterns are as fine and as well drawn as the best work of the others, his pistol has no engraved decoration whatsoever. Even his signature and date (a feature unique in itself) on the lock plate are inlaid, where other makers used engraving. The round comb on the cock has an inlaid five petalled flower, not the pierced stars or engraved flowers of the others. The only engraving is on the silver pricker, which may be a replacement. Details of the inlaid work may be seen in Pl. 24a, b.

The conclusion I would draw is that Hector McNeill served his apprenticeship at Doune, perhaps to one of the Campbell family, before settling in Mull. This may have been one of his first pistols made there; in 1745, twelve years later, his brother's letter reveals that he is still active there and that his father is alive. Further, his decorative idiosyncrasy suggests that inlaying and engraving were done by different craftsmen and that Hector McNeill was an inlay specialist.

Since the above was written more cleaning has been done, by Mr D. H. G. Cheape, and considerably more of the detail revealed; the photographs have been taken since this cleaning. The way in which the scrolls have been dowed and braised to the butt plates has also been revealed: one piece of metal forms both scrolls, with a platform between them into which the silver ball pricker screws; the metal of the platform is a fraction over 0.1 in. thick, and the two butt plates are braised to the scrolls along the lines of two dowels, or tongues, of metal, one on either side of the pricker platform.

<sup>1</sup> H. J. Jackson and C. E. Whitelaw, London, 1923.



a Steel pistol by Hector McNeill of Mull



b Detail of above



c A silver coffee-pot and hot milk jug by Colin McKenzie, 1713