

William Forbes Skene (1809–92): historian of Celtic Scotland

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William Forbes Skene (illus 1) was born on 7 June 1809, the second son of James Skene of Rubislaw, and Jane Forbes, daughter of Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo. He was born at Inverie, but not, as is often asserted (as for example in *DNB*), at Inverie in Knoydart, the property of MacDonnell of Glengarry. He was born on his father's small estate of Inverie (or Invery), by the Water of Feugh, just south of Banchory (Skene 1887, 141). The confusion is understandable, not only on account of the name Inverie, but also because of Skene's family connection with MacDonnell of Glengarry, noticed below.¹

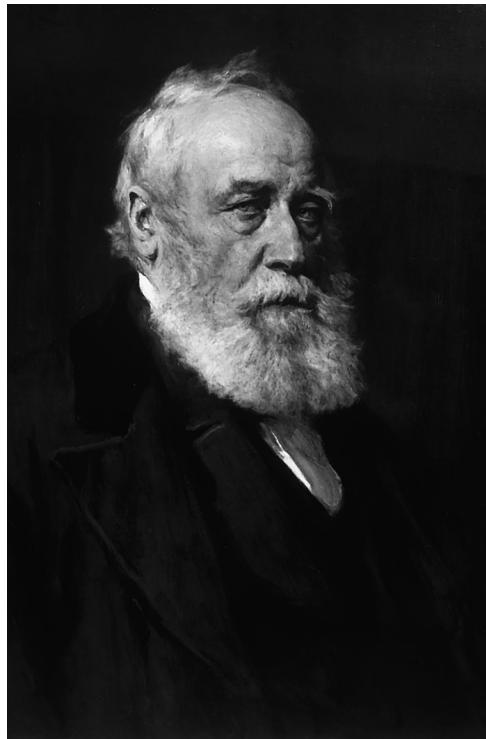
It is sometimes asserted that Skene was a Highlander, perhaps partly because of his supposed place of birth. Whether Skene thought of himself as a 'Highlander', I do not know, but if he did, it can only have been on account of his lowland Aberdeenshire antecedents. Both his parents were members of old Aberdeenshire families. Skene was certainly very conscious of his family background, and late in life edited a volume on the family of Skene of Skene and its cadets, including Rubislaw, his own line, for the Spalding Club (Skene 1887).² Ancestral uncles included the distinguished physician, Gilbert Skene (d 1599), 'medicinar' to James VI, and his brother, Sir John Skene of Curriehill (d 1617), Lord Clerk Register, editor of *Regiam Majestatem*, and an important figure in Scottish legal historiography (Table 1). It was no doubt out of pietas that William Forbes Skene edited *Tracts by Dr Gilbert Skeyne, Medicinar to His Majesty* for the Bannatyne Club in 1860 (Skene 1860).³ Another ancestral uncle was Sir George Skene (1619–1707), Provost of Aberdeen, whose house in Aberdeen can still be visited.

Skene's more immediate family was distinguished by any standards (Table 2). Six of his close relatives achieved separate entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: his father, James Skene of Rubislaw; his grandfather, Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo; his sister Felicia Skene; his uncle, John Hay Forbes, Lord Medwyn; his cousin Alexander Penrose Forbes, Episcopal Bishop of Brechin; and William Forbes Skene himself—as did also his uncle by marriage, MacDonell of Glengarry. Skene's grandfather, Sir William Forbes, was the leading Scottish banker of his day and a great supporter of the Scottish Episcopal Church: equally at home in rural Aberdeenshire, where he laid out the village of New Pitsligo; in London, where he was acquainted with Edward Gibbon, Samuel Johnson and others, through the Literary Club; and in Edinburgh, the centre of his business operations. He was a long-standing friend of James Boswell and acted as his executor. *DNB* gives him the credit, together with his partner Sir James Hunter Blair, for the formation of the South Bridge, Edinburgh. Forbes was Grand Master of the Masonic Order in Scotland, and

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was offered an Irish peerage by William Pitt in 1799, but declined. Of particular interest in the present context is the fact that Sir William was one of the original members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, serving as Treasurer from its inception until his death in 1806.⁴

Skene's father, James Skene of Rubislaw, was an advocate, an antiquarian, and an accomplished artist, but above all, for more than 30 years, a close friend of Sir Walter Scott. We learn from Scott's *Journal* that it was Scott's habit, when he travelled up from Abbotsford to Edinburgh, to dine with the Skenes on his first evening in town (*Journal* 1998, xliv). James Skene and his family, in turn, were regular visitors at Abbotsford. Sixty years later William Forbes Skene was to recall a visit to Abbotsford in 1831 with his father, the last time he saw Sir Walter: 'I had just attained my twenty-first year, and as such a visit at that early age was a great event in my life, I retain a very distinct recollection of the main features of it.' The day after his arrival, Sir Walter asked (W F) Skene to drive with him to Yarrow in an open carriage. They took a walk together, Sir Walter 'leaning on my arm . . . poring forth a continuous stream of anecdotes, traditions, and scraps of ballads. I was in the seventh heaven of delight, and thought I had never spent such a day' (*Journal* 1927, 813 and n). James Skene had spent some time studying in Germany before being admitted advocate in 1797, when his friendship with Scott began, founded partly on a common enthusiasm for German literature. Scott's introduction to canto iv of *Marmion* is dedicated to James Skene. In Scott's blackest hour, when bankruptcy seemed inevitable, he found some consolation in walking with James Skene in Princes Street Gardens (*Journal*, 23 June 1826; Thomson 1909, 136). The Gardens, incidentally, had been designed by James Skene himself not long before.



ILLUS 1 The fine oil portrait of William Forbes Skene by Sir George Reid, PRSA, here illustrated in black and white, was commissioned by his friends and admirers, and presented to him in 1888. At the presentation ceremony the Lord Justice General, John Inglis of Glencorse (1810–1891), Skene's almost exact contemporary, delivered a eulogy, 'the strength of which was all the more striking from the habitual moderation and dignity of language of the speaker' (*The Scotsman*, 30 August 1892). (Reproduced courtesy of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery⁵)

James Skene had sold Inverie in 1816, returning to live in Edinburgh (Skene 1887, 140). He became a fellow of both the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Society of Antiquaries. Indeed, according to *DNB*, ‘He helped to stir the Scottish Society of Antiquaries into new life’.⁶ James Skene became Curator of the Antiquaries’ Museum in 1819, a post which he held until 1836; and was Curator also of the Royal Society’s Museum and Library.⁷ He read a number of papers to the Society of Antiquaries, and was elected an Honorary Fellow in 1844 in the remarkably distinguished company of M Guizot (the French historian and statesman), the King of Saxony and the King of Denmark. Some of his drawings of sites of historic interest in Scotland passed to the Society, and are now in the National Monuments Record.⁸ As befitting a close friend of Sir Walter Scott, James Skene was a founder member of the Bannatyne Club.

William Forbes Skene’s mother’s family provides a further link not only with Scott, but also with a romantic view of Highland history. Skene’s uncle, the second Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo, was the man who married Scott’s first love, Williamina Belsches. He was also, as head of the banking house of Skene, Hunter & Coy, chairman of Scott’s creditors, and in that capacity did what he could to alleviate Scott’s burden. Skene’s aunt, Rebecca Forbes, married Alexander Ranaldson MacDonnell of Glengarry. Much has been written about this chief of Glengarry, who at once fascinated and appalled his contemporaries. Scott confided to his *Journal* that Glengarry was:

a kind of Quixote in our age, having retained in its full extent the whole feelings of Clanship and Chieftainship elsewhere so long abandond. He seems to have lived a century too late and to exist in a state of complete law and order like a Glengarry of old whose wish was law to his sept (*Journal*, 14 February 1826).

Glengarry is said to have provided the model for Fergus MacIvor in Scott’s *Waverley* and his behaviour and example is likely to have had a profound affect on his young and impressionable nephew, William Forbes Skene. Another aunt, Elizabeth Forbes, married Colin Mackenzie, one of Scott’s fellow Clerks of Session, and Deputy Keeper of the Signet.

I have dwelt for some time on Skene’s family history and background, not only because of Skene’s own evident interest in the subject, but also because it provides the key to so much in his life and work. Skene was born, then, in 1809 at Inverie, by Banchory. In 1816 he moved with his parents to Edinburgh. For the rest of his life, Edinburgh remained his home. Skene may have thought of himself as an Aberdonian — in his more romantic moments, perhaps even as a Highlander — but he was, in fact, a quintessential citizen of Edinburgh. He was educated at the High School and then, like his father before him, sent with his elder brother George to study in Germany at Hanau, near Frankfurt. On his return he attended Thomas Chalmers’ class in Ethics at the University of St Andrews before studying law at Edinburgh. Around 1830, according to his own later account, Skene fell into poor health and was advised to take some Highland air. On the recommendation of Sir Walter Scott he stayed with the Rev Mackintosh Mackay, minister of Laggan, who taught him Gaelic. ‘This excited in me a taste for Celtic Antiquities,’ wrote Skene, ‘and finding in Sir Walter’s library [on his visit in 1831] a copy of O’Connor’s *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores veteres*, I sat up one night transcribing from it the annals of Tighernac’ (*Journal* 1927, 813 and n). Sir Walter’s interest in Gaelic culture, indeed, went far beyond tartan and pageantry. Mackintosh Mackay was a friend and a distinguished Gaelic scholar. In his *Journal* Scott recounts how, on a visit to Abbotsford, Mackintosh Mackay inspected and read for him a manuscript of the medieval Irish Book of Rights — *Lebor na Cert* — a gift from the Rev John

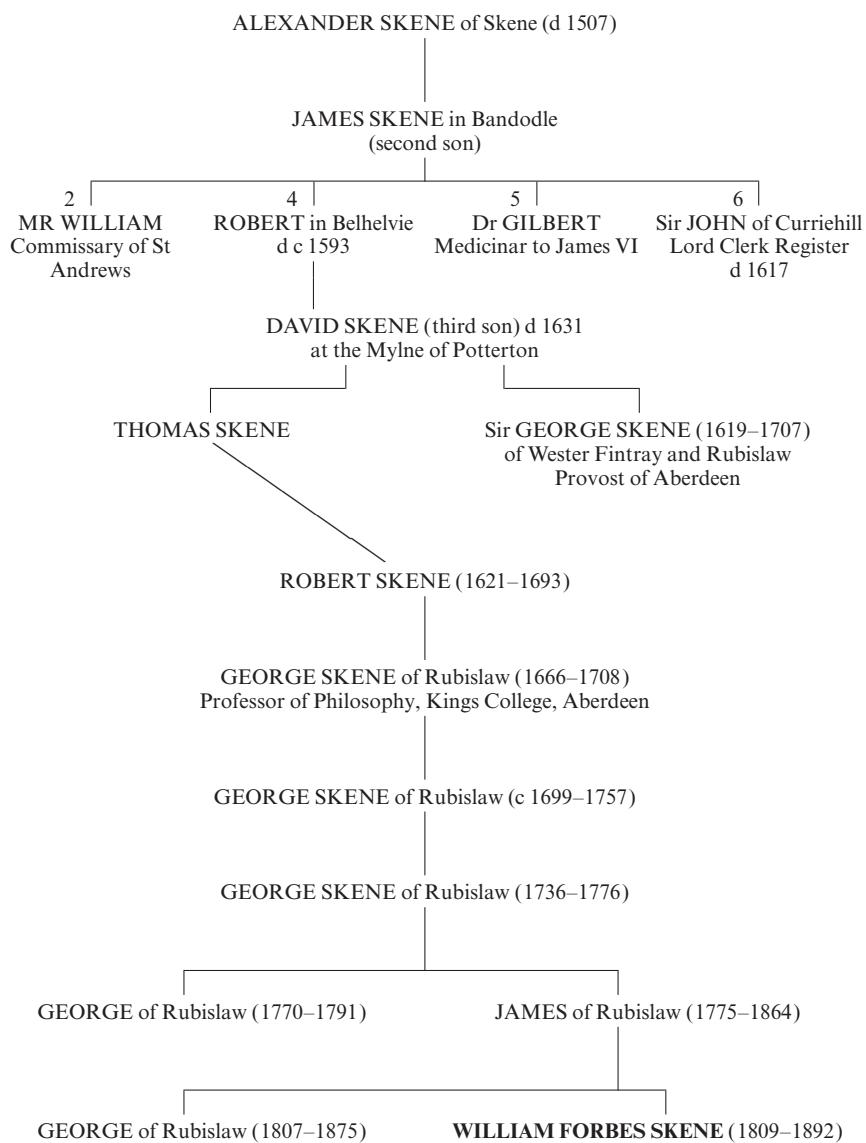
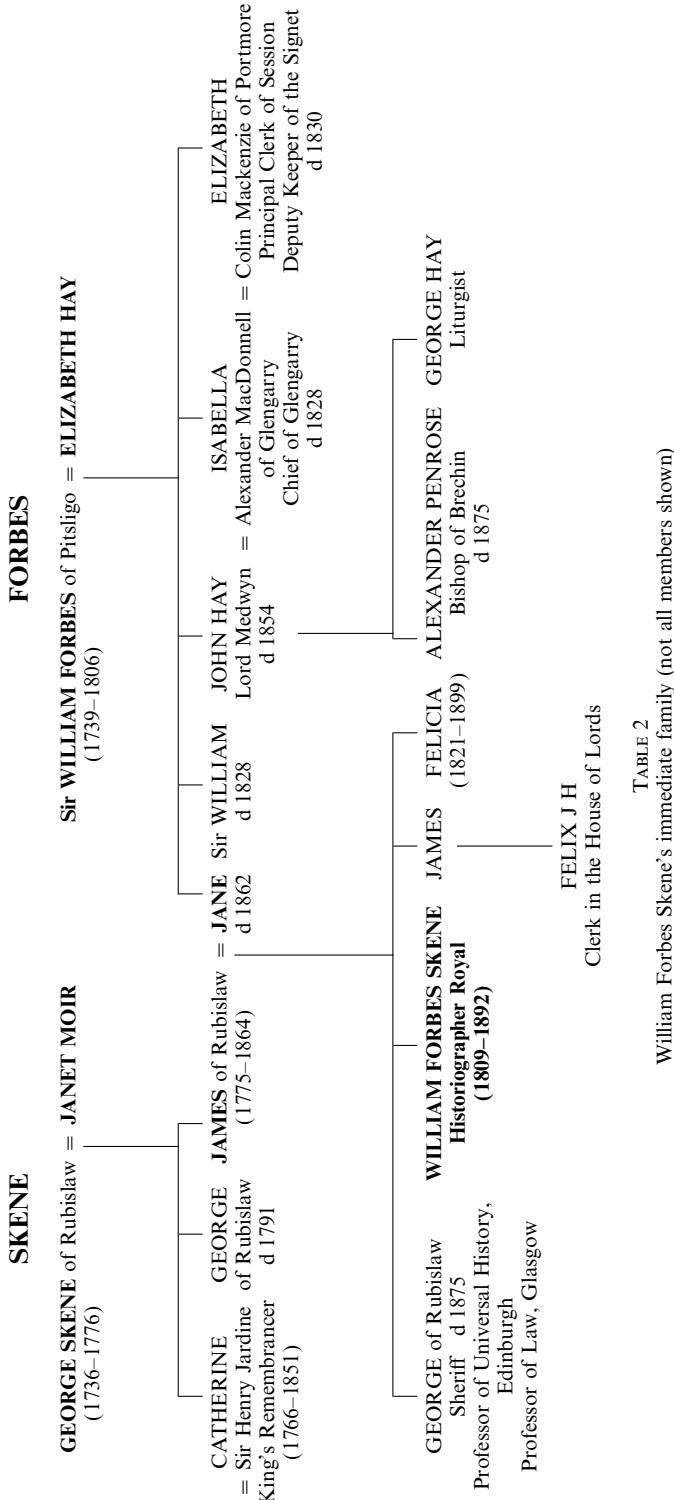
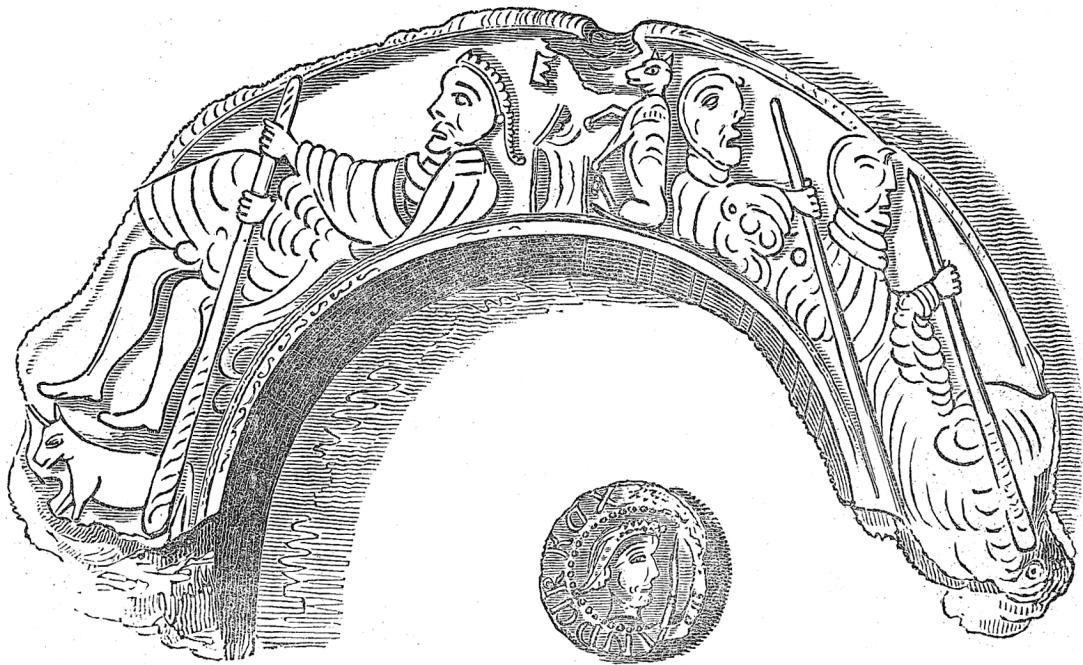


TABLE 1
Skene of Skene and Skene of Rubislaw

Brinkley, bishop of Cloyne (*Journal*, 28 May 1829). Scott also sent James Skene a Gaelic dictionary for the use of his eldest son George (Thomson 1909, 160–2). Sir Walter Scott then may be accounted a key influence on William Forbes Skene's later career. Scott's enthusiasm for things Gaelic was shared, incidentally, by the founders of this Society, for one of the office-bearers of the Society from 1785 until 1803 was a Gaelic Secretary. Perhaps it is time to re-establish the post.

Skene served his legal apprenticeship with Sir Henry Jardine WS, King's Remembrancer, yet another uncle by marriage, being admitted Writer to the Signet in 1831.⁹ It was about this time that Skene's connection with the Society of Antiquaries began. His father was already a





ILLUS 2 Engraving of the arch from Forteviot (*Archaeologia Scotica*, 4, 271). The arch is now displayed in the Museum of Scotland

Fellow. Sir Walter Scott had been Vice-President from 1827 to 1830. Sir Henry Jardine was also a stalwart of the Society, serving as Vice-President for no less than 15 years in all. He was the author of the dramatic account of the opening of the tomb of Robert the Bruce in Dunfermline Abbey in 1819, at which he had been present as King's Remembrancer (Jardine 1821).¹⁰ Skene read his first paper to the Society in January 1832, being admitted a Fellow in 1833. In that year (1833), William Forbes Skene, his father James of Rubislaw, and his brother George, between them read the astonishing total of eight papers to the Society — very much a family affair!

Skene's first paper to the Society, read in 1832, was entitled, 'Observations on Forteviot, the site of the Ancient Capital of Scotland' (illus 2) (Skene 1857). Already Skene showed an enviable command of sources obscure to most historians before him, and not a few later. He quoted from the *Annals of Tigernach* and the *Annals of Ulster*; he cited Bede and Adomnan; he referred to the '*Pictish Chronicle*', the Saint Andrews *Cartulary* and John of Fordun. He also discussed the topography of Forteviot, and cited descriptions written in 1633 and 1772. We need not agree with all Skene's conclusions, some of which now read rather oddly, but his main points were sound enough: that Forteviot had been an important early royal residence, and that the arch, which had been found in the bed of the river May, had 'every appearance of having formed a part of the ancient palace . . .'¹¹ (Skene 1857, 278). In all, this was a remarkable performance for a young man of 22, giving clear intimation of a great historian in the making.

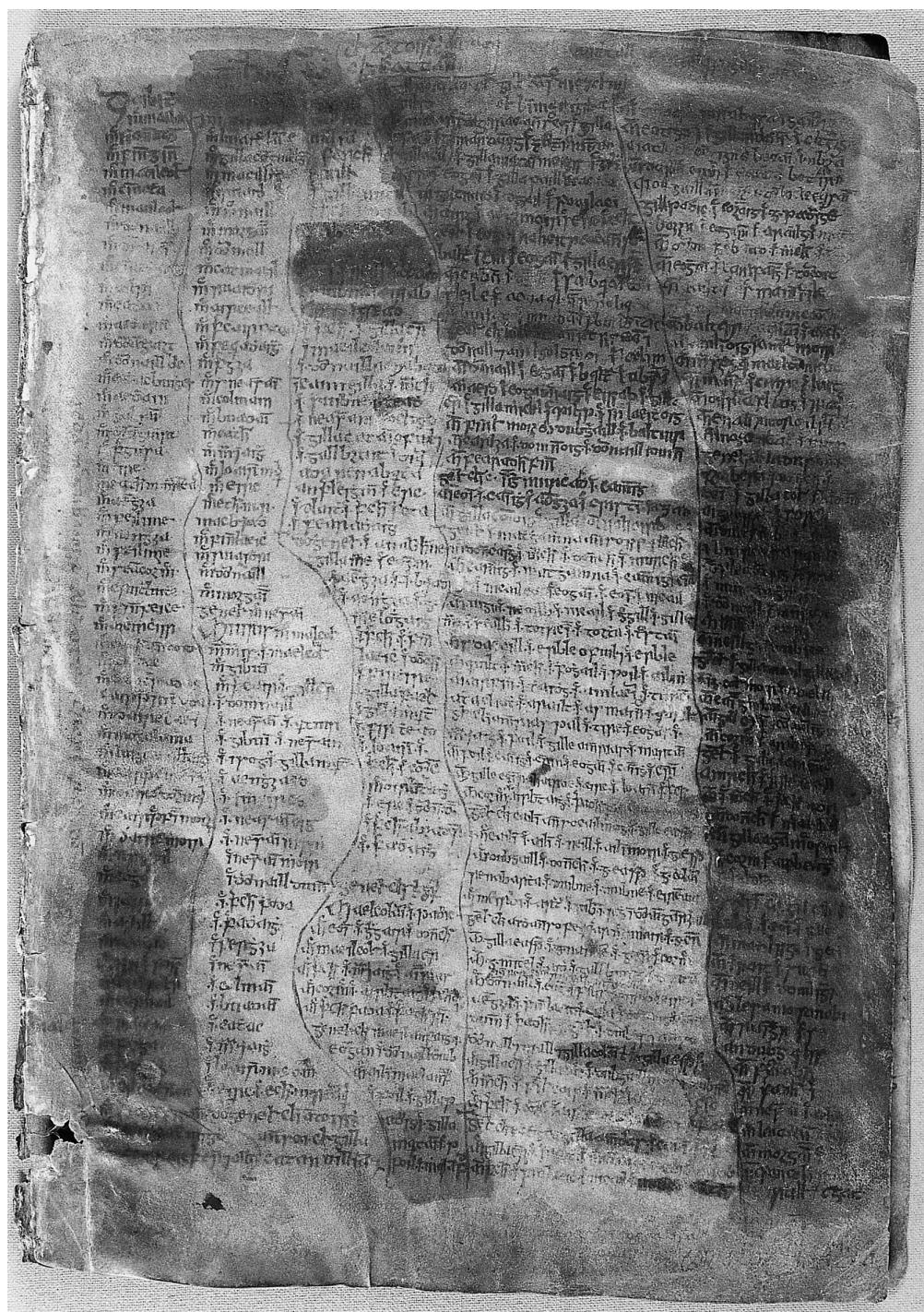
The Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries when Skene read his paper on Forteviot was another young man with a passionate interest in the history of the Highlands, Donald Gregory. He came from an academic family of the greatest distinction, whose record in producing Professors of Science, Medicine and Mathematics over many generations is perhaps unequalled in Europe.¹² Gregory's father James was Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh.¹³ An earlier

ancestor, James Gregory FRS (1633–75), was the inventor of the reflecting telescope. Donald Gregory's interest in Highland history may have been fired by the tradition that his Gregorys were originally MacGregors of Roro in Glen Lyon — a tradition appealed to by Rob Roy, who had hailed Donald Gregory's grandfather John in Aberdeen as a kinsman — and by the fact that his maternal grandfather was the redoubtable Donald MacLeod of Geanies, Sheriff of Ross for almost 60 years.¹⁴ Gregory became Joint Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries in 1828 and sole Secretary in 1830. Years later David Laing was to describe him as 'active and indefatigable' (Laing 1890, 15–16). Gregory read many papers to the Society, including one in 1830, later published in book form, on the early history of the Clan Gregor.¹⁵ In the *annus mirabilis* of 1833, when the Skene family read eight papers to the Society, Donald Gregory contributed a further five.

Skene and Gregory were clearly close friends, linked by a common interest. Their partnership, although sadly cut short, was to be of the greatest significance for the historiography of the Highlands. Skene joined Gregory as Joint Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries in 1834. Together they founded the Iona Club, instituted in 1833, and named 'in commemoration of the Monastery of Iona, the ancient seat of Scottish learning'; its object being 'to investigate and illustrate the History, Antiquities and early Literature of the HIGHLANDS OF SCOTLAND'. The rules relating to membership give some flavour of the times. There were three classes of member: Ordinary Members, 'from whom alone the office bearers are to be selected' (subscription: one guinea); Associate Members, 'consisting exclusively of the Clergy, embracing, however, those of every denomination in Scotland' (subscription: half a guinea); and Honorary Members, 'comprehending ladies of rank and influence representing Highland families, or who take a warm interest in the Highlands'. Original members included both Cosmo Innes and David Laing. There was a Council and also a Gaelic Committee, the latter including the Rev Norman MacLeod and the Rev Mackintosh Mackay. Skene was Treasurer and Gregory Secretary (Gregory & Skene 1847).

The Iona Club's main achievement was a collection of papers, edited by Gregory and Skene, which circulated among the members of the Club in the 1830s, and was published as *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis* in 1847 together with an account of the Club and its constitution (Gregory & Skene 1847). The collection included a paper entitled 'Genealogies of the Highland Clans, extracted from Ancient Gaelic MSS', with translation and notes by Skene. The principal manuscript consulted was the precious folio of medieval Highland genealogies, now best known as 'MS 1467', but here referred to as 'MS 1450' by Skene, who had found it by chance in the Library of the Faculty of Advocates' (illus 3).¹⁶ Skene also supplied 'Extracts from Irish Annals', including those of Tigernach, Innisfallen and Ulster, again with translation and notes; and 'Extracts from the Norse Sagas', including *Ynglinga Saga*, *Landnamabok*, *Njals Saga*, *Laxdaela Saga* and *Orkneyinga Saga*. To search out and publish such sources at that time was a considerable achievement. Although Skene was not given to boasting, he did later note with pride that he had believed been the first person to recognize the importance of the Sagas as sources for Scottish history (Skene 1886–90, i, 400n). It must be admitted, however, that Skene's transcription of 'MS 1450' in particular, was far from perfect.

In 1836 Donald Gregory published his *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*, a work which still remains valuable (Gregory 1836). In his preface he thanks, among others, Cosmo Innes, David Laing and William F Skene. The following year saw the publication of Skene's *Highlanders of Scotland* in two slim volumes entitled respectively *Highlanders of Scotland* and *The Highland Clans* (Skene 1837). This had originated as a prize essay submitted to the Highland Society of London. In his Preface Skene referred to 'the general neglect of Highland history', which he put down to 'that extraordinary prejudice against the Celtic race, and against



ILLUS 3 'MS 1467' (referred to as 'MS 1450' by Skene) Genealogies of the Highland Clans (NLS Adv MS 72.1.1 recto). (Reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Scotland)

TABLE OF THE DESCENT OF THE HIGHLAND CLANS.

	Name of the Tribe according to Ptolemy.	Name of the Mormorship or Barldom.	Name of the Great Clans.	Name of the Small Clans.	Name of the Chief.
Dicaledones Cruthne or Northern Picts	Kaledonioi ...	The Gallgael	Siol Cuinn ...	Clan Rory ... Clan Donald ... Clan Dugall ... Clan Neil ... Clan Lachlan ... Clan Ewen ... Clan Dugall Craignish	Macrory. Macdonnell. Macdugald. Macneill. Maclellan. Macewen. Campbell of Craignish
			Siol Gillevray	Clan Lamond ...	Lamond.
			Siol Eachern ...	Clan Robertson. Macfarlane. Macpherson.	
			Clan Donnachie ... Clan Pharlane ... Clan Chattan ... Clan Cameron ... Clan Nachtan ... Clan Gilleon	
			Siol O'Cain ...	Clan Roich ... Clan Gillemhaol ...	Maclean. Monro. Macmillan.
	Kanteai ...	Moray ...	Clan Anrias ... Clan Kenneth ... Clan Mathan	Ross. Mackenzie. Mathieson.
			Siol Alpine ...	Clan Gregor ... Clan Grant ... Clan Fingon ... Clan Andiba ... Clan Duffie ... Clan Quarrie ... Clan Aulay ...	Macgregor. Grant. Mackinnon. Macnab. Macphie. Macquarie. Macaulay.
				Macleod. Campbell. Mackay. Macnicol.
				...	
	Kreones ...	Garmoran	Clan Leod ... Clan Campbell	
	Kournaovioi ...	Caithness	Clan Morgan	
	Kairinoi ...	Ness ...	Clan Nical	

ILLUS 4 The long-lived but misleading 'Table of the Descent of the Highland Clans' from Skene's *Highlanders*

the Scottish and Irish branches of that race in particular, which certainly biased the better judgment of our best historians'. *Miorun mor nan Gall*.¹⁷ Skene set out to remedy that defect. He also acknowledged 'the very great obligations' which he owed to Donald Gregory for his assistance.

In his *Highlanders* Skene made full use of the sources which were to appear in the *Collectanea*, and put forward a new and controversial view of Highland history. So far from the Highlanders being descended from the Dalriadic Scots, which Skene regarded as a 'fundamental error', he believed that they descended 'step by step from the Caledonians'. Both the Caledonians and their Pictish successors had in Skene's view been Gaelic speakers. Skene was thus opposed to John Pinkerton's then fashionable theory that the Picts were Germanic or Gothic, but did not follow George Chalmers and earlier historians back to George Buchanan in detecting a British or Gaulish element among the Picts.¹⁸ Skene's account of the later Highland clans, although innovative and imaginative, was unfortunately marred by the inaccurate transcription of 'MS 1450'. His exceedingly speculative 'Table of the Descent of the Highland Clans' (Skene 1837, ii, 305) was to enjoy a far longer currency than it deserved (illus 4).¹⁹

Sadly, the fruitful partnership between Skene and Gregory came to a sudden end with Gregory's death in 1836 at the age of only 32. David Laing was later to write that, 'Mr Gregory was unfortunately cut off in the prime of life in October 1836, at a time when it was understood he had an immediate prospect of obtaining a somewhat lucrative appointment as a reward for his labours' (Laing 1890, 15–16). The shock for Skene seems to have been traumatic. The Iona Club appointed him Secretary in Gregory's place, but although the Club lingered on in name for a while, it achieved nothing further of significance, save for the publication of the *Collectanea*. Skene also became sole Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries on Gregory's death, but resigned in the following year leaving no clear successor. He read two further papers to the Society early in 1837, while he was still Secretary, but nothing further until the 1860s, save for a brief note in 1844

and two short papers in 1852.²⁰ Instead, he concentrated on his legal career. His father, James Skene, left Edinburgh about 1836 to live in Greece, where he remained until 1844.²¹

After being admitted a Writer to the Signet, Skene had become a Clerk in the Bill Chamber of the Court of Session, eventually rising to be a Depute Clerk of Session, a post which he held from 1853 until 1867 (*History* 1936, 320). Although these were not full time positions, they were certainly not sinecures, and involved regular attendance at the Court of Session for much of the year. Around 1858 Skene founded his own law firm, which still survives today, through various changes of name, as Skene, Edwards WS.²² Robert Louis Stevenson did his legal apprenticeship with this firm, but never, it seems, realized that his master was a famous historian — ‘and I was his blessed clerk and did not know it’ (Booth & Mehew 1994–5, no 2782; Cowan 2000, 4).²³ Skene remained head of the firm until his death in 1892. He was also for 27 years an active director of the Commercial Bank of Scotland.

From 1846 until 1850 Skene was deeply involved in Highland famine relief. Anxiety as to growing famine in the Highlands led to the formation of a number of voluntary committees to help alleviate the situation. An Edinburgh Committee was founded at the end of 1846 with Skene as its Secretary, and a Glasgow Committee a few weeks later. In February 1847 a single Central Board for Management for Highland Relief was established with Skene as its Secretary. The Board was still in theory voluntary, but its activities were closely monitored by the bureaucrats of the Treasury. It is difficult to resist the impression that Skene found himself between a rock and a hard place. The Board was very large, having 117 members, including the leaders of the Churches and the Universities, the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor-General. It was expected to function for a year only, but the situation in the Highlands remained so desperate that it was continued until 1850. The sums involved were large, and the organisation of relief far from easy. Tom Devine, to whose work I am indebted for many of these details, but whose assessment of Skene I do not necessarily share, notes that, ‘By the end of 1847 the Central Board had at its disposal a massive £209,376 available for famine relief, probably the greatest single cash sum raised voluntarily in 19th century Scotland for the relief of distress’ (Devine 1994, 153; see also Devine 1988). Each year the Board produced a number of lengthy Reports which remain an important historical source. These were compiled by Skene himself, as he tells us in a footnote in *Celtic Scotland* (Skene 1886–90, iii, 378).

Skene was a deeply religious man, and a devoted adherent of the Episcopal Church. Few families in Scotland, indeed, had been more closely identified with Episcopacy than that of Forbes. Skene’s grandfather, Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo, and his uncles, the second Sir William and John Hay Forbes, Lord Medwyn, were major benefactors of the Episcopal Church in Edinburgh, the second baronet being closely associated with the building of St Johns in Princes Street (Perry 1939, 5–10). Skene himself was particularly associated with St Vincent Church at the foot of Howe Street, then a congregation of the so-called English Episcopal Church in Scotland, and helped, it is said, to effect an accommodation between that body and the Scottish Episcopal Church. He taught in Sunday school for many years, publishing his notes as *The Gospel History for the Young* in three volumes (*The Scotsman*, 30 August 1892; MacKinnon 1895, ix; Skene 1883). His youngest sister Felicia also inherited the piety of the family, helping the poor in Oxford for over 50 years, and acting as ‘the pioneer of the modern Prison Visitor’ (Thomson 1909, viii; *DNB*). Skene’s cousin, Alexander Penrose Forbes, was a controversial bishop of Brechin. A standard-bearer for the Oxford movement in Scotland, and a friend of Gladstone, he stood trial for heresy in 1860 before the Scottish Episcopal Synod, and was censured and admonished in proceedings which, it is generally thought, did his accusers little credit (Perry 1939, esp chs 6 & 7). The Bishop’s brother, George Hay Forbes, although crippled from an early

age, was also an Episcopal priest, and a leading liturgist (Brown 1999). Skene himself maintained an informed interest in theology; indeed, Donald MacKinnon calls him ‘a well-equipped theologian’ (MacKinnon 1895, ix). One of his last works was a translation of *Messe und Pascha* (Lord’s Supper and Passover) by the German theologian Gustav Bickell, to which he contributed an introduction on relations between the early Christians and the Jews (Skene 1891).

Another facet of Skene’s life was the important role which he played in the collection and preservation of Gaelic manuscripts. His chance discovery of ‘MS 1467’ in the Advocates’ Library has already been noted. Skene was early concerned for the safety of Gaelic manuscripts, and urged their owners to deposit them in a public library or with the Faculty of Advocates. As a result, by 1862 the Advocates’ Library possessed 65 Gaelic manuscripts where formerly there had been only four (MacKinnon 1912, 1). Skene compiled a rudimentary catalogue of these manuscripts, later entirely superseded by Donald MacKinnon’s *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1912 (MacKinnon 1912). Skene’s own collection of manuscripts included the ‘Black Book of Clanranald’, which he had bought in Dublin and later gave to the chief of Clanranald; and the Fernaig manuscript, given to him by the trustees of Mackintosh Mackay. Together these two manuscripts make up a substantial part of the second volume of *Reliquiae Celticae* (Macbain & Kennedy 1894). Had Skene achieved nothing else in his life than the preservation of Scottish Gaelic manuscripts, historians of the Highlands would still owe him a very great debt.

Skene was Vice-President of the Society of Antiquaries from 1852 to 1855. He returned to serious academic study and writing in the 1860s. The mere tally of what he achieved over the next 20 years by way of books and articles is enough to induce fatigue in the faint hearted. I shall mention two papers only here, both read to the Society of Antiquaries. The first concerned the battle of Arderydd, fought among the Britons of the North about AD 573, and long remembered in Welsh tradition as the battle in which Gwendoleu was killed and the poet Laloecen (whom some take to be Merlin) went mad (Skene 1866). In his curious book, *The Quest for Merlin*, Count Nikolai Tolstoy writes, ‘The site of the battle was identified long ago by the historian W F Skene in an address to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland on 15 February 1865. It must have been an exciting occasion’ (Tolstoy 1985, 50). Indeed it must. It is fascinating to read how Skene backed his hunch as to the site of the battle by taking the train down the old Edinburgh–Carlisle line — alas, no more — to Longtown, and walking the ground at Arthuret Knowes, at Upper Moat Farm by the Liddel, and by the Carwinelow burn. His identification of Arderydd with Arthuret has been accepted ever since. The second paper, read in 1869, discussed the Stone of Destiny, and was later published as a book (Skene 1869). It was an exercise in demythologizing, and the beginning of wisdom on the subject. Skene’s conclusion was this, ‘that there was no connection between the stone at Scone and the Lia Fail at Tara, and that the legends of their wanderings, like that of the tribes with whom they are associated, are nothing but myth and fable’. The Stone, Skene asserted, ‘never was anywhere but at Scone’ (Skene 1869, 44).

In 1862 Skene contributed an introduction to Thomas M’Lauchlan’s edition of *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* (M’Lauchlan 1862), a text which Donald Meek has made very much his own. In 1867 Skene edited under the name of *Chronicles of the Picts, Chronicles of the Scots: and other Early Memorials of Scottish History* sources for Scottish history before John of Fordun in Latin, Gaelic and Welsh, taking the death of Alexander III in 1286 as his cut-off point (Skene 1867). In 1868 he published his *Four Ancient Books of Wales* (the Black Book of Carmarthen, the Book of Aneurin, the Book of Taliesin, and the Red Book of Hergest), with translations by Welsh scholars, and a full introduction, in which he discussed, among other things, Welsh and North British history in the sixth century and the location of Arthur’s battles (Skene 1868). Much of the ground covered by Skene in these volumes was not to be traversed again until A O Anderson’s

Early Sources of Scottish History published in 1922, the Chadwicks' *Early Scotland* in 1949, and Marjorie Anderson's *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* in 1973. In 1871 and 1872 Skene published a critical edition of the *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* of John of Fordun, with many historical notes, as for example on the origins of Scottish thanages, together with a translation by his nephew Felix Skene (Skene 1871; 1872). In this Skene sought to separate Fordun's original work from that of Walter Bower, both having been printed together in Walter Goodall's earlier 1759 edition of *Scotichronicon*. Thanks to Donald Watt and his team of scholars, we now have a magnificent, nine volume edition of Bower (Watt *et al* 1993–8). Skene's *Fordun*, however, has not yet been superseded, although the need for a new edition has been clearly recognized (Broun 1999a, 16–20; also Broun 1999b and Watt *et al* 1993–98, 9, 234). Skene was also instrumental, along with his cousin, the Bishop of Brechin, in reprinting Reeves' edition of *Adomnan's Life of Columba* in the Historians of Scotland series; and he contributed to Felix Skene's edition of *Liber Pluscardensis* in the same series (Reeves 1874; Skene, F J H 1877; 1880).

Then came Skene's crowning glory, *Celtic Scotland: A History of Ancient Alban* (Skene 1876–80), the result of so many years of work and reflection. It appeared in three volumes, volume one, 'History and Ethnology', in 1876; volume two, 'Church and Culture', in 1877; and volume three, 'Land and People', in 1880. There were many appendices: appendix VIII to volume three, in particular, the 'Legendary Descent of the Highland Clans, according to Irish MSS', has seen heavy use over the years, the prime manuscript consulted here being 'MS 1467', now more accurately transcribed. A second, lightly revised edition appeared 10 years later (Skene 1886–90). This is not the occasion to assess the merits of *Celtic Scotland* in any depth. Instead, I shall bring Skene's life to a close, and then note the opinions of some of his critics, notably Alexander Macbain.

The University of Edinburgh had conferred an honorary LLD on Skene in 1865. Oxford followed in 1879 with a DCL. In 1881, after the death of John Hill Burton, Skene was appointed Historiographer Royal for Scotland. Skene died at his house in Inverleith Row, Edinburgh on 29 August 1892. He never married, although he helped to bring up some of his nephews and nieces. He was buried beside his parents in the Skene family vault at St John's Episcopal Church, Princes Street. This part of the burial ground has now been incorporated into a side chapel, where there is a memorial to the family. An appreciative obituary appeared in *The Scotsman* (30 August 1892) — written, I think, by Aeneas Mackay, who later contributed the entry on Skene to *DNB*. On 15 January 1894 Professor Donald MacKinnon, himself a Gael from Colonsay, read an obituary notice to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which combined a moving tribute to Skene the man with a critical assessment of his published work (MacKinnon 1895).

Five years after Skene's death, however, in January 1897, Alexander Macbain read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness a paper which was very critical of Skene, entitled 'Mr. Skene versus Dr Skene' (Macbain 1899). In it Macbain contrasted 'Skene Young', as he put it, with 'Skene Old'. He had been moved to write he said because 'the popular historian and clan controversialist prefers Dr Skene's earlier work of 1837 to his maturer work of 40 years later on "Celtic Scotland"', or, at any rate, quote the two works as of equal value' (*ibid*, 191). Skene's *Highlanders*, however, had been full of 'blunders', many of them 'quietly corrected', to use Macbain's phrase, in the later work. Thus Skene had been mistaken, for example, in his views on mormaors, toiseachs and the 'Culdee Church'. He had relied too much on the dubious evidence of the Sagas. His account of the early MacDonalds and MacDougalls was 'weak and confused' (*ibid*, 201). He had quite misconstrued matrilineal succession among the Picts (*ibid*, 196, 210). And so on. Much of this criticism is justified, but it is the tone which surprises: the criticism reads as harsh and unsympathetic throughout, and sometimes positively hostile. It is far more than a comparison between Skene Young and Skene Old; more a criticism of Skene's methodology and his entire

output. Skene's genius, we are told, was 'constructive' rather than 'critical'. He displayed a 'besetting tendency . . . to accept documents as belonging to the time at which they *pretend* to have been written' (p194, emphasis supplied). He had little understanding of the principles of scientific philology. He had no interest in anthropology or archaeology. The only two works from Skene's entire canon which Macbain was prepared to praise were his *Chronicles of the Picts and the Scots* and, perhaps surprisingly, given the respective religious affiliations of Skene and Macbain, the second volume of *Celtic Scotland* on 'Church and Culture'. It is altogether an astonishing indictment.

In addition to the points already noted, there were two major matters about which Macbain judged Skene to have been comprehensively mistaken: the language and ethnology of the Picts; and the alleged eighth-century Pictish conquest of Dalriada. Part of Skene's purpose in writing his *Highlanders* had been to advance the revolutionary idea that the Picts (or most of them) were Gaels through and through, in culture and in speech, and were the ancestors of the later Highlanders. Although Skene did not press this view so strongly in *Celtic Scotland*, and allowed for the possibility of at least some P-Celtic influence, he was a long way short of a complete recantation. As regards Dalriada Skene put forward the view, both in the *Highlanders* and *Celtic Scotland*, that the Dalriadic kingdom collapsed in 741 before the assault, the *percussio Dalriatae* of the Annals, of the Pictish king Angus mac Fergus (*Oengus mac Fergusa; Onuist son of Uurguist*) — whom Skene, of course, regarded as a Gael — and did not recover until the time of Kenneth mac Alpin (*Cinaed mac Ailpin*) a century later. Kenneth's traditional pedigree, which deduced his descent from earlier rulers of Dalriada, Skene regarded as distinctly suspect.

On both these issues, posterity has sided with Macbain. It is worth noting, however, that a hundred years on, there is still no consensus about the language and ethnology of the Picts, nor as to the rules of succession to their kingship (see eg Jackson 1956; Forsyth 1997; Smyth 1984; Sellar 1985; Woolf 1998; Ross 1999). There is a lively ongoing debate about the correct reading of ogham (Forsyth 1997; Cox 1999); and the question as to when the Gael first reached Alba has been re-opened (Campbell 1999). Nor is there agreement as to relations between Dalriada and the Picts in the 60 years or so before Kenneth mac Alpin. No-one, I think, would now take Skene's line about the long-term collapse of the Dalriadic kingdom, but Skene's arguments on Kenneth's pedigree have been followed (mistakenly, I believe) by Alfred Smyth (Smyth 1984, 180–6), and scholars remain divided as to whether Constantine mac Fergus, and his brother, the second Angus mac Fergus, who ruled Pictland in succession from 780 until 834, were essentially Picts or essentially Scots (on which see now M O Anderson 1982; Wormald 1996; Broun 1998; & Bannerman 1999). Skene was certainly aware of the problem presented by the sources, even if his solution has not proved acceptable. In addition, the status of the Sagas generally as historical sources, and of *Orkneyinga Saga* in particular, still remains controversial 150 years after the publication of Skene's *Highlanders*.

Macbain must have realized that he had gone too far. In the short life of Skene which he prefaced to his second edition of Skene's *Highlanders*, the tone is different (Macbain 1902, xiii–xiv). Macbain was content there to quote from Donald MacKinnon's assessment of Skene, delivered to the Royal Society of Edinburgh:

[Skene] had a vigorous intellect, a powerful memory, a judgment in the main calm and clear. He possessed, in no small measure, the constructive faculty that was able to fit together into a whole isolated facts gathered from many quarters, the historical imagination that could clothe the dry bones with flesh and skin, and make the dead past live again. (cf MacKinnon 1895, x)

Some reservations, however, clearly remained, for Macbain could not resist adding that, ‘Dr Skene was undoubtedly possessed of high constructive ability, but he was weak in the critical faculty. This is shown in his method of dealing with his authorities and his historical materials.’ Macbain concluded more generously that:

The Celts of Scotland, however, owe Dr Skene a deep debt of gratitude, for he was the first to draw their early history out of the slough into which it had got, and to make it respectable. For this end he lent the weight of his learning and position to the cause of the Scottish Celt at a time when it was sorely needed; and he made writers of Scottish history devote fuller attention to the Celtic side of Scottish affairs.

That said, however, Macbain’s very valuable editorial excursus and notes to Skene’s *Highlanders* seemed so critical to at least one modern commentator that he referred to Macbain’s ‘almost contemptuous edition’ of Skene (Anderson 1967, 142). It must, indeed, be an open question whether Macbain was well advised to produce a second edition of the *Highlanders* in the form he did. Editorial excursi and endnotes, however excellent, are not always read, and it is arguable that the main result of the new edition was to give renewed currency to views of ‘Skene Young’, which ‘Skene Old’ had modified or recanted, and with which Macbain himself profoundly disagreed.²⁴

How can we account for Macbain’s bias against Skene? It is only possible to guess at the reasons. In part, it may have been the result of a clash of generations, for Macbain was nearly 50 years younger than Skene. In part, it may have been the Highlander reacting against the Edinburgh establishment. There may have been an added social dimension as well, given Skene’s rather grand background. In part no doubt, Macbain’s stance also reflects the difference in temperament between two types of scholar, the one precise and careful to a fault, the other of a more speculative disposition.

But this cannot be the whole explanation. The answer, I suggest, lies not in the history of the medieval, but of the 19th-century Highlands. *Is treasa tuath na tighearna* — the people are mightier than a lord — was the rallying cry of the Highland Land League. Macbain would have agreed with this, but Skene, I think, would not. In Highland eyes Skene was doubly suspect. Firstly, he was suspect as Secretary of the Board of Management for Highland Relief from 1847–50. The Board’s policy that relief should only be granted in return for work, save in cases of destitution — the so-called ‘destitution test’ — had been widely viewed as harsh and oppressive (Devine 1994, 170–5; Cowan 2000, 4). As Secretary of the Board, Skene was naturally identified with this policy, fairly or otherwise, and his reputation suffered accordingly. Secondly, Skene must have been suspect — indeed, more than suspect — as the founder and head of the Edinburgh legal firm which acted for many landowners, including Lady Gordon Cathcart, absentee proprietrix of South Uist and Barra, and daughter-in-law of Gordon of Cluny, one of the most notorious of Highland evictors. Here, surely, is the extra dimension which explains Macbain’s animus towards Skene.

Later commentators, further removed from the trauma of 19th-century Highland history, have been more generous in their assessment. Hector and Nora Chadwick dedicated their book, *Early Scotland: The Picts, The Scots & The Welsh of Southern Scotland*, published in 1949, to the memory of William F Skene. In the introduction Nora Chadwick wrote of the ‘outstanding excellence of method and breadth of range’ of men such as Skene in the field of history, and Joseph Anderson in archaeology; comparing them to W J Watson and A O Anderson in her own

day (Chadwick 1949, xxv). H M Chadwick discusses Skene's views with respect throughout, although it is interesting to see him refer to:

a serious mistake, the most serious that I have found in his [Skene's] works. He thought that the kingdom of Dalriada came to an end with Alpin's death, which he synchronized with the *Percussio Dalriatai* (AU), effected by the Pictish king Oengus I in 741. Henceforth, according to him, the country was under Pictish rule. (Chadwick 1949, 128; also p 18n)

A O Anderson himself, although far from uncritical of Skene, observed that, 'All those that condemn him use his books' (Anderson, 1922, i, lxxxviii).

A rare discordant note was struck in 1967 by James Anderson, an adored admirer of George Chalmers (1742–1825), in a harshly critical article, 'William Forbes Skene *Celtic Scotland v Caledonia*', which compared Chalmers with Skene to the latter's disadvantage. Anderson believed that much of Skene's work had been skewed by his insistence in regarding the Caledonians and the Picts as Gaelic-speaking precursors of the later Highlanders. Anderson's conclusion, however, that 'Skene was a man with a mission: to minimize the influence of Ireland upon Scotland' seems extreme (Anderson 1967, 147). More recently Geoffrey Barrow has endorsed A O Anderson's remark that all those who condemn Skene use his books, adding, 'Certainly without Skene not only the history of the Highlands but also our whole way of looking at the history of Scotland would have been poorer' (Barrow 1981, 17). In 1981 Gordon Donaldson, like Skene Historiographer Royal for Scotland, believed that *Celtic Scotland* for all its flaws had not been superseded (Donaldson 1981).²⁵ Most recently of all Professor Ted Cowan has written, in a volume which had its genesis in a Conference held in 1992 to commemorate the centenary of Skene's death, 'But — quite simply — *Celtic Scotland* cannot be ignored by anyone investigating the first millennium and a half of Scottish history' (Cowan 2000, 4).

In compiling this short memoir I have concentrated on the biographical as so little has been written about Skene the man. Yet a hundred years on one cannot fail to be impressed by the range of Skene's scholarship, by his extraordinary energy, by the boldness of what he attempted, and by the durability of so much of what he achieved. A remarkable proportion of Skene's work, for all its acknowledged flaws, has still not been superseded. We still await, for example, modern scholarly editions of some, at least, of 'the Four Ancient Books of Wales', of John of Fordun's *Scotichronicon*, and of 'MS 1467'; while *Celtic Scotland* continues to enthuse amateur and professional alike.²⁶ I conclude with a passage from Aeneas Mackay's entry in *DNB*:

Skene had many advantages for the task of a Scottish historian: a talented father, an intellectual home, a boyhood spent in the atmosphere of Walter Scott, a thorough knowledge of the Highlands and its inhabitants, a taste for languages and philology, especially Celtic, with opportunities for cultivating it both at home and abroad, ample preparation by the study of Celtic sources at first hand, and a long life. Yet all these would not have sufficed had he not possessed an historic instinct and a patriotic desire to enlarge the boundaries of the history of Scotland and throw new light on its darkest age.

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NOTES

- 1 Alexander Macbain also first gave Skene's place of birth as Knoydart: 'a Highlander, too, by birth, which took place at Inverie of Knoydart' (Macbain 1899, 193), but later corrected this to Kincardineshire (Macbain 1902, xiii). The confusion persists to this day.
- 2 Much of the material for this volume, Skene tells us, had been collected by his father, James Skene of Rubislaw (Skene 1887, vii).
- 3 The volume was presented to the Club by Skene's father, James Skene of Rubislaw.
- 4 There is an account of Sir William Forbes and his banking career — 'Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo (1739–1806) was the *beau ideal* of the Edinburgh banker' — in Checkland 1975, 157ff. The fourth canto of *Marmion*, dedicated by Sir Walter Scott to James Skene, also contains two stanzas in praise of Sir William Forbes.
- 5 The Reid portrait also appears as the frontispiece to Macbain 1902. After Skene's death the portrait passed to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. The Gallery also holds another, very different representation of Skene, by the celebrated silhouettist Auguste Edouart (1789–1861), taken over 50 years earlier, and showing him as a young man about town. The silhouette is one of a series executed in Scotland by Auguste Edouart in the 1830s. Edouart later went on to make his name as a silhouettist in the United States. The Portrait Gallery also has a Hill and Adamson calotype, allegedly of Skene, but the attribution must be doubtful on the grounds of lack of likeness to either portrait or silhouette.
- 6 James Skene is referred to, rather curiously, as a 'geologist' in R B K Stevenson's history of the early years of the Society of Antiquaries (Stevenson 1981, 61). His career would repay further investigation.
- 7 James Skene played a vital role as Curator of the Antiquaries' Museum: he was in post at the time of the move of the Museums of both Societies to the Royal Institution building at the foot of the Mound in 1826, and reported to the Antiquaries on the state of the Society at the Anniversary Meeting on 30 November that year (Stevenson 1981, 61–9; and *Archaeologia Scotica*, 3, xxiv–xxviii).
- 8 John Stuart writes in the introduction to his *Sculptured Stones*, 'To Mr W F Skene, WS, I am obliged for a Sketch Book of his father's, which contained drawings and lists of some of the stones, and suggested inquiries for others' (Stuart 1856, xvi). Later, while resident in Greece, James Skene painted several hundred water colours of Greek scenery and antiquities.
- 9 *History of the Society of His Majesty's Signet*, 1936, Edinburgh, 6.
- 10 see also *Archaeologia Scotica*, 2, 435–55.
- 11 In the paper Skene dismissed the widely held belief, founded on Hector Boece, that Abernethy had been the capital or 'metropolis' of the Picts. Skene noted the appearance in Irish annals of the title of 'king of Fortrenn'; but his equation of 'Fortrenn' and 'Forteviot' was mistaken, and his comparison between the principal figure portrayed on the arch and an alleged coin portrait of King Alexander I was distinctly wild.
- 12 Sir Francis Galton highlighted the family of Gregory in his pioneering work, *Hereditary Genius*, first published in 1869. See also, *inter alia*, Agnes Stewart, *The Academic Gregories*. Curiously, most accounts of the family do not mention Donald Gregory's distinguished contribution to the history of the Highlands.
- 13 James Gregory was also present at the opening of Robert Bruce's tomb in 1819 (Jardine 1821, 32).
- 14 For an account of the career of Donald MacLeod of Geanies see Munro, R W & Munro, J 1966, chs 8–10.
- 15 Donald Gregory's paper, 'Inquiry into the Earlier History of the Clan Gregor, with a view to ascertaining the Causes which led to their Proscription in 1603' was read to the Society on 22 March

- 1830, and published the following year (Gregory 1831; see also *Archaeologia Scotica*, 4, 130–59; and 3, 317–29).
- 16 The manuscript is now, properly, NLS Adv MS 72.1.1, the genealogies of the clans being given in the first folio. The descriptions ‘MS 1450’ and ‘MS 1467’ were both, apparently, first coined by Skene.
- 17 *Miorun mor nan Gall*: a Gaelic phrase describing the Lowlander’s ill-will and spite towards all things Highland. For the neglect of Highland history see also Cowan 2000.
- 18 For an informative recent account of Scottish historiographical writing, discussing George Buchanan, Father Thomas Innes, John Pinkerton, George Chalmers, John Hill Burton, William Forbes Skene and many others, see Ferguson 1998.
- 19 It was reproduced, for example, in Frank Adam’s popular *Clans, Septs and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands* (1st edn, Edinburgh & London 1908). Its influence lingers still: on 20 February 2002 a leader in *The Scotsman* began with the words, ‘One of the seven clans descended from King Alpin of Dalriada, the MacGregors . . .’.
- 20 One of the papers read by Skene in 1837 has the intriguing title, ‘On the History and Constitution of the ancient Norwegian Kingdom, and subsequent Lordship of the Isles’ (*Archaeologia Scotica*, 4). Unfortunately, the text does not seem to have survived.
- 21 James Skene died in Oxford in 1864 in his 90th year.
- 22 The firm has been known variously as Skene Peacock; Skene Edwards and Bilton; Skene Edwards and Garson; and Skene Edwards.
- 23 I am indebted to Professor Cowan for this reference and for letting me see a draft of his paper before publication.
- 24 Skene’s alterations were by no mean always silent. In *Celtic Scotland*, for example, he writes: ‘A suggestion made by the author in an early work (*The Highlanders of Scotland*, published in 1837), in which, he believes, the Sagas were for the first time used in Scottish history, that two kings of Scotland of the name of Malcolm have been confounded — one who died in 1029, and Malcolm mac Kenneth who died in 1034, and that the latter was Kali Hundason — has unfortunately been adopted by Professor Munch in his *History of Norway*. The author has long since come to the conclusion that this theory is untenable’ (Skene 1886–90, i, 400n).
- 25 This is not to undervalue the notable contribution made by Professor A A M Duncan in the first volume of the Edinburgh History of Scotland of which Donaldson was the general editor (Duncan 1975).
- 26 Skene, with his connection with Sir Walter Scott and the Publishing Clubs, might be thought to provide a striking example of the late Marinell Ash’s theory as to ‘the strange death of Scottish History’ (Ash 1980), although she only mentions him in connection with the Iona Club.

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