

The Short Grioghal

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For my godchildren

Prologue

We are at the breakfast table. It is sort of a tradition to leisurely enjoy breakfast and bury ourselves in the newspaper every Sunday, that is, when we are both home. And we are both home today. Still, I cannot seem to get into the same routine I usually embrace even though it is not all that obvious to share a lazy Sunday morning together.

I had to pick a police officer, you see – I beg your pardon – a DS, a Detective Sergeant who loves the job, really loves it. Then again, I cannot object too much because I was warned from day one. The big boss himself came over, took me aside and with a stern look told me that I had to think what I was getting myself into.

“This one really is police material. Wasn’t made to remain a DC, and isn’t made to stay a DS either. Shortie’s at least DI material. That’s long hours, weekends, cancelled romantic trips...”

I could not be deterred. My brother is police too, so I thought I knew the score. Still, it is true. When on a case, “Shortie” works long hours, works weekends and works when the two of us have planned a weekend out. “Shortie” works a lot. I guess some clichés really are true.

Worse, Shortie is the sort of officer with a standing even beyond the borders of the team. When my brother was introduced, he had heard of “Shortie MacGregor”. Well, he is police too, but in another department. Still, it says something, I think.

“Mmmm,” the newspaper says.

I look up.

“Shortie”: it was how we met and how we got talking.

The both of us had something to celebrate that first evening we met. I celebrated my graduation. I had my degree in Scottish History and I wanted to share my joy with my friends. At the table next to us, a loud group of police officers was roaring and toasting and simply making a lot of noise about one of theirs getting promoted to DS. The city was safe, I thought then, with Edinburgh’s finest getting all smashed.

Epecially the newly promoted DS was being poured one glass after the other. “Shortie under the table!” was the goal set for that evening. I thought they were pathetic.

I have changed my mind since then.

But at that moment, I was trying hard not to notice them, which was virtually impossible. They were claiming the place for themselves. And then the big boss himself got up, raised his glass and stated proudly,

“To Shortie, who now has a title that really fits: Da Short MacGregor!”

I had to look. I had to look and observe this Short MacGregor. I had to start a conversation and exchange phone numbers. Well, I am pretty upfront, sometimes a bit too upfront my brother says, but it worked then. In fact, I got the attention of the entire team that evening and it was thanks to them that I actually got a call back the following day. I was pretty surprised to hear anything at all really, because by the end of the evening the group had effectively managed to get “Shortie under the table”, so I had kind of assumed my phone number would have disappeared somewhere in a drunken haze. But not the case. I received my phone call, though I must admit I was rather amused and curious to hear two colleagues egging their DS on. I could clearly hear them say to ask me out. I have learned since then why they were there and why they were right to be there. Timidity can have a brutal history, and when that history is still very visible it will paralyse one’s actions.

But we met again and I got to know the Short MacGregor. And the Short MacGregor became my Short MacGregor soon after. And half a year later the entire police force was mobilised to move our individual belongings into one home. At least I managed to track down one Short MacGregor. If only I could put my finger on the other one...

You see, during my research for my dissertation on the amusing tradition of cattle raiding, I came across a character I so much wanted to include in my paper, but because I found so little information about him, I had to drop him altogether. And I found that really stung. It still does. On my way to a proper

PhD I still want to know more about him: the Short Grioghal – the Short MacGregor.

Between early 1604 and the end of 1605 the areas of Glen Lyon, Glen Orchy and Glen Dochart were frequently raided by a cateran who was so successfully lifting cattle from the Campbells that they actively hunted him; well, they hunted him even more fervently than the rest of the clan that had been proscribed by royal decree in 1603. And the Glenorchy Campbells were really hunting the clan; they even trained dogs to catch and kill them. But no matter how hard they tried and how many MacGregors they captured, the elusive Short Grioghal was not amongst them.

Until he disappeared. Without a trace. The Campbells did not get him, because I can only assume that if they had caught him they would have made a big fuss about it before they killed him. And no such excitement ever transpired. So he must have remained free. Which leads to the totally illogical conclusion the Short Grioghal suddenly arrested all his cattle-raiding activities and vanished without a trace for no reason at all.

Or maybe not.

“Stupid journalists,” it sounds.

Then the newspaper is put down and I get to see the face that goes with the grumbling voice.

“What?” I ask.

“Stupid journalists. What do they think: that every murderer leaves a calling card or leaves his DNA at the scene of the crime? And even if he does, are they that stupid to believe we have DNA samples of every criminal in the country? ... Mm, that might be an idea: collect the DNA of every baby as soon as it's born. Yep, that might do it.”

I let the rattling pass me by as I drift away again, off to the discovery I made yesterday. I am still so awfully enthusiastic about it, but I know someone in this room will not share my enthusiasm. But I want to try. I have to try. I so much want to continue my search.

I display my most innocent and needy face. I know what it will do to the one opposite me.

“What?”

“There was this murder,” I start.

“What? Where?”

“In the township of the Short Grioghal.”

“Oh, no, not that one again. Is that what you’ve been doing all day yesterday?”

“Yes, well, I have to do something when you’re off all day long.”

“You knew I had to work.”

“Well, I was working too... and I think I made a breakthrough.”

“Oh, hip hip hurray, is the search over now? Are you finally coming back to the present tense?”

“I found another clue.”

“Another clue! Another clue!”

“Yes, I found there was a murder in his township, so...”

“He’s dead then! Good! Good riddance!”

“No! I don’t know if he’s dead. That’s what I want to find out now.”

“Now?”

“Well, yes, I had hoped to go back for a few hours and...”

“It’s Sunday, hon’. For God’s sake, it’s Sunday.”

“Just a few hours,” I beg.

I am actually getting up already. Yes, I have made up my mind about this and no police officer is going to get in my way, Sunday or no Sunday.

“I want to find the Short Grioghal,” I yawn.

“I am the Short Grioghal! You know, D S MacGregor: Da Short MacGregor.”

“Just how long do you intend to stay a DS?” I throw back, “Because Biggie told me you intended to be a DI years ago.”

“I’ll be a DS just until you bloody well believe I’m the Short MacGregor!” it sounds heatedly.

“Ts ts,” I reply sarcastically, “Biggie won’t be happy about you remaining a DS.”

A pair of brown eyes glares at me. Someone is getting very angry with me. And my mocking pair of eyes does not exactly make it better.

“So you’re really off now?”

I nod.

“On a Sunday?”

I nod again.

“Fuck! What does he have that I don’t?”

“Availability. I know what I’ve got with you.”

But that seems to be the final straw.

“Don’t you take me for granted, Eleanor Menzies!”

I do not want to hear it. I simply grab my car keys and walk out of the door, leaving my partner close to fury. I am spoiling our Sunday. I will have to make up for that later. I will have plenty of time for that after I have finally found the real Short Grioghal. And I know I am close.

Then again, I have said that before.

I drive back to university. It is not all that long, but it is still enough to wipe out the angry face I left at home. We will be alright. Our relationship is solid enough for me to slip out now and then. Even better, by the time I reach my room at university, I find an e-mail from my angry DS.

If there was a murder in that township, there are a couple of options: a) it was your Short MacGregor that got killed (I’ll drink to that!); b) he was the one that did the killing, so he fled (in which case he’s a bad apple and you shouldn’t love him so much); c) he got entangled in the murder. Start with the basic facts of the murder: do you know who was murdered; do you know where; do you know how and why? Start with answering those questions and then consider the options. If options b or especially c are true, you should broaden your horizon. You’re focussing too hard on the near vicinity. He could have fled to his neighbours, or his neighbours’ neighbours. If you’ve looked for all these years with the MacGregors and you can’t find him anymore, maybe that is because he’s not there anymore. Widen your horizon.

And then get back home.

Your Short MacGregor – the one you left

I smile. It is useful to live with a police officer. They can be full of bright ideas at times. I would not have minded searching for the Short Grioghal together, but on the one occasion I dared to ask, I got the reply that if I wanted the help of the police I had to try it with Morse. Do not ever tell the police what to do in their free time. They are a grumbling lot, that whole department.

But advice was nice. Advice was rare too.

MacGregors' neighbours: they had plenty of those. Their most powerful and threatening ones were the Campbells, so it is rather unlikely my Short Grioghal would have found shelter there given his leniency towards lifting their cattle. But the Campbells were literally all around the MacGregors. They encircled the few remaining MacGregor communities. There were the Robertsons further to the North and even further North and to the East the Menzies (the very ones, indeed), to the West some Fletchers and to the South of them the MacNabs, the Murrays and the Drummonds. The MacGregors had strong allies with the Fletchers, but the latter had become unwilling Campbell tenants as well. I do not know if that may have affected his choice. The MacGregors had legally acquired some land at Stronfernan of the Robertsons (or the Donnachaidh as they were called), but the proscription had made the MacGregors flee or change their names. They had also lived as tenants of the Menzies in Dunan, but they had been evicted, when King James VI had decreed that all chiefs were responsible for those on their own lands. Nobody wanted to be held responsible for the unruly MacGregors.

I smile. I proudly claim responsibility of my MacGregor... I have since day one. I can be proud of myself.

The MacGregors were originally linked with the MacNabs, but those times were long gone by 1604. Plenty of MacGregors lastly, did take the names of Murray or Drummond. Is there any mention of a Short Murray or a Short Drummond, preferably one active in cattle raiding?

No, I have to start with the basics: who was murdered? I can figure out who was murdered. I can find that.

I dive back into the papers I got yesterday. I sift through the new information, add more information to it. I go back four hundred years in time. I am being led more northwards. I go through Glen Lyon and leave it far behind me. I cross Rannoch Forest. I stumble upon an unexpected discovery.

I. Seoras

“Do you really think the cattle could have been moved over here?” Cameron asked.

“No, God, no,” Seoras replied, “Those cattle are long gone. They’ve been sold within the first few days after he’s lifted them.”

“The Campbells were at Amulree. They have been there since the day after their cattle got lifted. They surely must have been there faster than the Short Grioghal. I mean, I know he’s good, but he could not have moved the cattle faster than Campbells on horseback.”

“Mm,” Seoras muttered.

The Short Grioghal was too smart to go to Amulree with his cattle. He probably had sold off his livestock long before he had reached the tryst. There were plenty around to do lucrative business, even with the Gregarach. Or he could have headed south with his raid, into the Lowlands, deeper and further from hunting Campbells.

“I heard they had even put in cows with uncommon features, just so they would surely pick out their own herd if it got stolen.”

Seoras started grinning now.

“Yes, and you know that the limping cow was left grazing right next to where they found the white cow, well, that is to say, where they found the remaining parts of it. The meat had been cut out, but its skin was there. No, no, believe me, Cameron, that one is not daft. He will not lift one single beast that might betray him. He is not like those idiots who stole that sheep from the Colquhouns.”

They had to steal and eat the one beast with black paws... and carry its skin around. Of course they were caught.

The thing was that most sympathised with those stupid MacGregors. It was just not done to refuse to harbour folk in need, which was exactly what those Colquhouns had done. Of course it would lead to the entire clan being upset. Seoras would be upset too if one of his men was refused shelter. It was against every good Highland tradition. The only thing Seoras

could not understand was how the MacGregors and especially their own chief could have been so foolish to blindly take the bait and let them be used by the Argyll Campbells in the latter's personal vendetta with the Colquhouns. The MacGregors were like Campbell puppets, when they raided the rich lands of the Colquhouns. What did they think: that Argyll, Justiciar of Scotland, would claim responsibility? Of course he would get away scot-free! And he did. And look where it got the Gregarach: they ended up being proscribed. And their worst enemies – the Glenorchy Campbells – were hunting them like madmen. They had lost everything!

But there were some who refused to give up and stubbornly resisted. They were out in the wilder parts of Rannoch Forest, or hid in caves, or they had fled to the hills. And then there were those whose identity remained hidden, much to the frustration of the Glenorchy Campbells. The Short Grioghal was the most important one. No one knew who he was. All knew where he resided though: somewhere in the settlement between Loch Lyon and Loch An Daimh. They might call themselves Fletchers, but everyone knew they were MacGregors. The Menzies knew they were there and the Donnachaidh did so too, but neither minded all that much. The Short Grioghal never raided their cattle, but only lifted Campbell property. Not even Seoras' clan chief could object to that. The Donnachaidh turned a blind eye as well. You reap what you sow, Seoras thought, and the Campbells deserved everything they got.

The Glenorchy Campbells could not leave things like that and regularly invaded the township. It was mostly women there, with only a few men, one of whom was Diarmid, son of one of those who had been hung beside Alasdair, Chief of the Gregarach, in 1603. Despite having a Fletcher mother and being raised amidst Fletchers, Diarmid dubbed himself Campbell; he thought it could protect him. The Campbells still took him with them at the end of September. It was the time when all the cattle were being moved to Amulree and the Campbells thought that if they arrested the captain of the township they were safe.

They were wrong. Diarmid was not the Short Grioghal. Worse, whoever he was, he made Diarmid look like a total fool. He had hardly been arrested when someone in that same township went into action. It was a statement.

“The Short Grioghal is the true captain of that township, Cameron. Whoever he is, he undermines his authority,” Seoras muttered.

“Whose authority?”

“Diarmid’s. Can’t you see the joke of this? The Campbells arrest Diarmid because he’s the supposed leader of that township, and what happens? As soon as they imprison him, the Short Grioghal sets off and lifts some three hundred cows. It must have been quite some humiliation.”

“Mm, but there’s little Diarmid can do about that, is there? I mean, they’re saved for another winter, aren’t they?”

“I don’t know,” Seoras replied.

Diarmid was a dangerous man. He was a rapacious rogue, the sort that had gotten the MacGregors into the mess they currently found themselves in. He was viciously unkind and turned to violence to get anything done. He was quite the opposite from his opponent who, despite his *criminal* activities of hership, never used violence at all. Every time someone did end up killed or wounded, Diarmid had played a vital part in the raid. Whereas the Short Grioghal was tacit, premeditated and had only ever been spotted from a distance, Diarmid was loud, aggressive and nastily impulsive. He was nothing like his father. Who knew how he would respond to the challenge?

“He won’t show up here,” Seoras said.

Except that their Menzies chief had asked all the chieftains of the townships to watch out for all MacGregors. He could not afford to have the Campbells on his back, because he feared the Campbells would use anything to take control over yet another territory to add to their own. Momentarily Menzies’ territory was off-limits for all Gregarach, no matter what title they had adopted.

“Why are we here then?”

“Because Father asked it.”

It was a test. Seoras knew that much. His father increasingly handed over responsibility of the township to Seoras, and with Eilidh back, Seoras was sure his father would prefer to engage himself with his daughter rather than anything or anyone else. Seoras doubted if Eilidh would be all that happy with it.

“Right,” he grumbled, “let’s walk over there and head back then, before Father chases Eilidh away again.”

“How is she?” Cameron asked.

“Fine,” Seoras replied.

It had felt great to see his “baby” sister again. But she was no baby anymore; she was no child anymore either.

“I hear she is still not married?”

Seoras did not like the look on his friend’s face.

“Don’t tell me, Cameron. Eilidh is not ready for it.”

“It’s just a polite question,” Cameron defended.

Eilidh had just returned from Edinburgh, where Father had allowed her to study to become a midwife and nurse. He had done that for two reasons: Eilidh was an intelligent woman and the township could do with a real “healer”, but she was also a headstrong young woman who seemed to turn down every man who asked for her hand in marriage. Father thought that maybe she would meet some intelligent man in Edinburgh who could win her heart and head. But on her return the day before, she was still happily single. And Father urgently wanted her to find a suitable husband. He wanted her to be properly looked after. Seoras felt sorry for his young sister, but there was only so much he could do. He was married himself now, with two children and a third one on its way. He would have had three already if they had not lost their third soon after birth. Maybe Eilidh could prevent that from happening again.

Just when Seoras wanted to get up, he heard a noise. He put his hand on Cameron’s arm and kept him laid low. Out of the dark they saw a figure approaching: a small individual, struggling to keep walking. Seoras thought he looked drunk. He had to be drunk to be walking like that. He had to be drunk to be walking around here. He looked like he could fall down any second. But that was not the issue. Seoras did not care

whether he was drunk or not; he wanted to know who he was and what he was doing here.

Seoras closely watched the area. He had to be sure this individual was alone and not some scout sent ahead of a band lurking about. But he could not see anyone. The drunken man swayed closer and except for his steps on the wet ground, not a sound could be heard. No, this one seemed to be all alone and lost... and drunk.

Seoras jumped up and drew his sword. Cameron got up as well and got his sword close as well.

“Halt! Who are you?”

The figure stopped. Seoras could not see his face, which was hidden under his plaid. He did not say a word, but seemed to wait. He waited for what?

“Who are you and what are you doing here?”

The intruder moved a few paces until he stood right next to a gigantic tree he leaned against next. It was then Seoras noticed the sprig of Scots Fir tucked underneath the rope holding his plaid. Only the Gregarach wore that with pride. But he had to be a complete fool to wear that at a time like this. It was an open invitation to kill him at once.

“MacGregor, who are you and what are you doing here?” Seoras questioned him again, but no answer came.

They could not have MacGregors roaming these lands. No matter how much Seoras disliked the Campbells, he would not risk a direct confrontation with them. Either this MacGregor willingly turned around and went back to wherever he came from, or Seoras would have to kill him. And Seoras really did not want to kill for the sake of one distant King ruling over an entire clan’s faith.

Seoras took a step closer, but the MacGregor did not waver. He kept staring at the ground. He must have been walking for quite a while, because Seoras noticed he had dirt up till his knees. One could not remain drunk for several miles.

“What are you going to do about him?” Cameron whispered.

Seoras walked up to him and swiftly grabbed his shirt with his left hand, his right hand defensively holding his sword. He pulled him closer, but then the man just fell down and Seoras