

# *Marriage Patterns and Social Sectors in Scotland before the Eighteenth Century*

IAN CARTER

The history of Scotland is the history of a number of distinct social and political units.

Scottish history is at bottom a provincial history, yet it has suffered from the failure of historians to grasp this fundamental truth. All our standard histories are written from the viewpoint of a national entity which is assumed long centuries before it existed (Simpson 1923: viii).

Rosalind Mitchison proposes that Scotland, for the purposes of historical analysis, should be divided into three exclusive sectors: Highlands, Lowlands and North (Caithness, Orkney and Shetland) (Mitchison 1962:4). This paper presents a test of the existence of an autonomous Highland social system between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, during the latter part of the period in which clanship was the organising principle of Highland social structure. It is an empirical test of an argument presented in an earlier paper (Carter 1971:113).

The study rests on the assumption that the choice of marriage partners for a clan chief or the head of a cadet branch of a clan, and for the corresponding actors in a Lowland family, was an important political decision before the institutional incorporation (Pearse 1971:75) of the Highlands into the national community. Fraser of Reelig asserts the political importance of marriage for the chiefly line of Fraser of Lovat:

A scrutiny of the proved Lovat pedigree reveals that the chief's subsequent prosperity was primarily due to a sequence of carefully planned marriages. After 1416 they sought no more landed heiresses. But for nearly a century—from 1416 till 1512—no chief married into a Highland family, though sometimes his younger children might. The chiefly marriages were with the noble "Names" of Wemyss, Lyon, Gordon and Gray... Even after 1512 no MacShimi married a MacDonald, a MacLean, a Cameron, or a MacKintosh. Anyone familiar with Scottish history of this period can see the wisdom of this self-restraint, for by this alone could the favour of the Crown be retained, and the chiefly patrimony rendered secure. Highland relationships in particular were prone to involve the whole kindred in sanguinary feuds, if not open rebellion. The Lovat chiefs were well aware of this danger. (Fraser of Reelig 1966: 17-18).

The establishment of cadet branches was an essential part of consolidating the clan's hold on its territory (Fraser of Reelig 1966:19), so the marriages of the heads of such cadet branches would clearly also have political significance for clan members. Moreover,

although there was a preference for endogamy and patrilocal residence in the clan system, that system was cognatic rather than patrilineal (Fox 1967: 159). That is to say, a child inherited membership of his father's clan, but he was also a member of his mother's clan. In a society, like that of the Highlands, where cognatic descent groups formed the kinship structure and kinship was intimately bound up with economic and social structure, marriage alliances would clearly be extremely important political actions. The analysis of the marriage patterns of clan gentry and Lowland family heads should show whether or not the Highlands formed an autonomous social and political sector before 1700, by seeing if it was thought worthwhile, in a situation where marriages were arranged, to make alliances by marriage within the Highland area.

### *Method of Study*

The definition of the Highland area is taken from Grant (1961: 10). The boundary follows the Highland Boundary Fault in the south then follows the edge of the hills around the Mounth, cuts the Moray coast at Nairn, and excludes Caithness and the North Isles. The eight hundred foot contour line is taken as the boundary round the Mounth, and straths which penetrated into the Highland area at a lower level are regarded as Highland from the point where the strath cut the extrapolated eight hundred foot contour. This definition of the Highland area, shown in Figure 1, is largely based on geographical criteria; but the definition is social and cultural rather than geographical. Cleavages in language and culture, religion, social organisation and economic production are superimposed on this geographical division between Highlands and Lowlands (Carter 1971: 109-111).

Cases are chosen to provide examples of Highland clans living well away from the boundary with non-Highland areas (MacDonald and MacKenzie), an example of a Highland clan living close to the boundary (Fraser of Lovat), and examples of Lowland families (Burnett of Leys and Fraser of Philorth). The choice of particular cases is governed by the availability of good genealogical information. The method is to abstract from the genealogical information the name of each head of the clan or family and its branches who died between 1500 and 1900, or as late as the source allowed if before 1900. Dates of death are used rather than dates of marriage because the former are much more frequently recorded. The name of the wife or wives of each individual is also abstracted, and the name of the place of residence of the father of the wife or wives.<sup>1</sup> The name of the wife's father and his place of residence are the crucial data: they are used to establish whether the marriage formed an alliance within the Highland area or the non-Highland area, or whether links were forged across the Highland boundary. 'Non-Highland' is a residual category in this analysis: it is taken to mean anywhere not included in the Highland area. This would obviously cause problems in some studies, but does not matter here since the key concern is the autonomy of the Highland sector.

A time-cut is established at 1700. This is an arbitrary date, since the destruction of

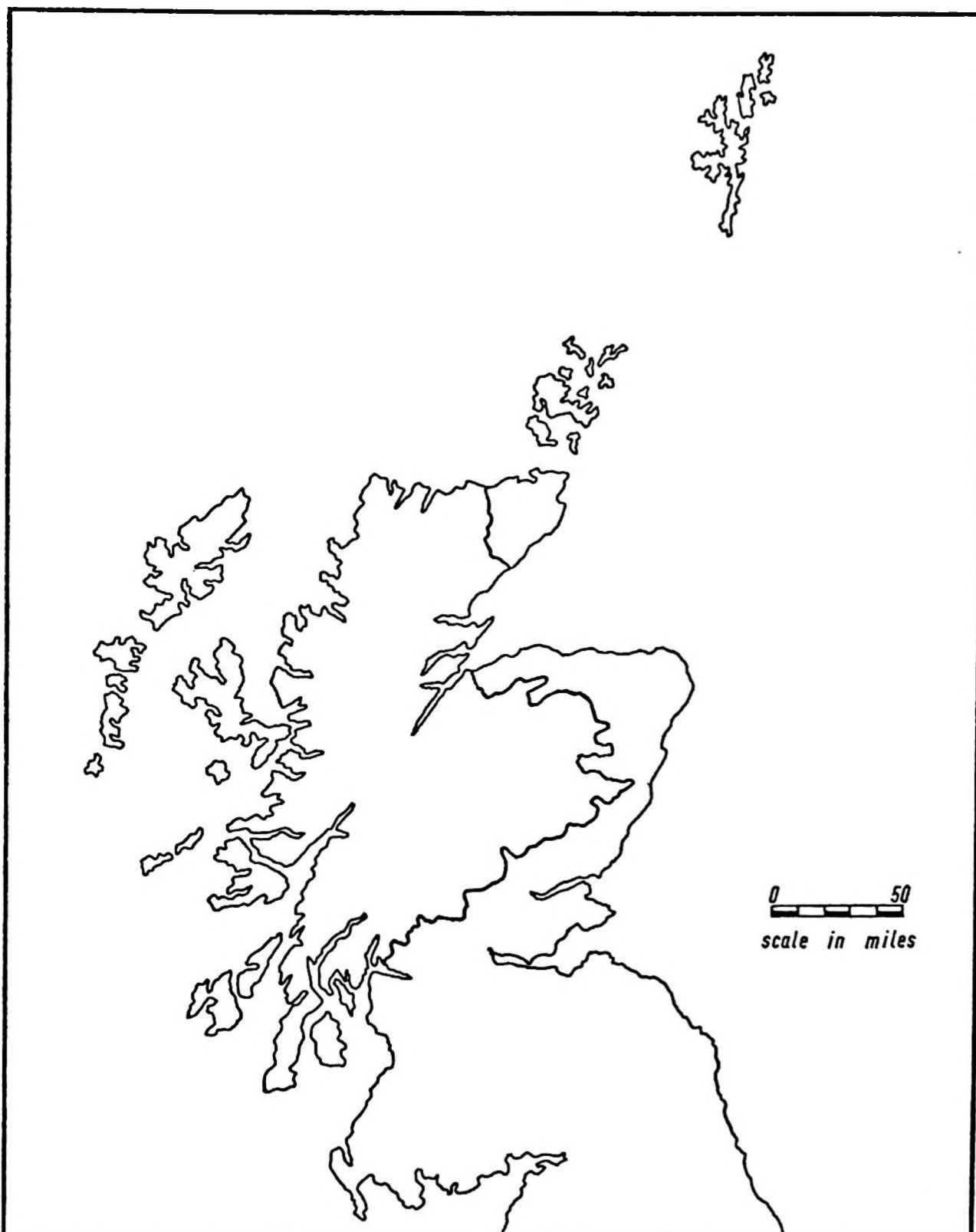


FIGURE 1 : THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN HIGHLAND,  
LOWLAND AND NORTH SECTORS.

clanship and the centralisation of political authority in Scotland took place over several generations—although one can identify key events in this process, such as the legal changes that followed the Jacobite Rebellions. Where the information on death dates is incomplete the cut-off point is established by means of a convention that a generation is twenty-five years. This will clearly introduce errors, but such errors will be randomly distributed.

### *Results*

Cross-classification of the data on the two dimensions of Highland/non-Highland paternal residence and death before or after 1700 produce the results shown in Tables 1 to 6. Tables 1 and 2 show the results for the West Highland clans, the MacDonalDs<sup>2</sup> and the MacKenzies.<sup>3</sup> Despite the differences in the origin (Grant 1961:15-16, 18) and history of these clans, the data present remarkably similar patterns. In each case one finds before 1700 a very strong tendency for chiefs and the heads of cadet branches to marry, and thus form alliances, within the Highland area. The proportion of marriages contracted with partners from outside the Highlands increases after 1700, in both cases, to about one-third of all marriages.

TABLE I  
*Marriage Patterns of Clan MacDonald, 1500-1880*

	<i>Origin of Wife (Per Cent)</i>		<i>Number of Cases</i>
	<i>Highland</i>	<i>Non- Highland</i>	
1500-1699	93	7	46
1700-1880	66	34	80

Table 3 shows that the family of Burnett of Leys,<sup>4</sup> unambiguously Lowland yet living no great distance from the Highland line in Aberdeenshire, never saw any advantage in making alliances with Highland Clans. There is not one instance, before 1700 or after, of a wife of a Burnett laird coming from the Highland area.

Table 4 shows that the Frasers of Philorth<sup>5</sup> had a disinclination to marry Highland girls almost as marked as that of the Burnetts. The proportion of marriages contracted with Highland partners increased slightly after 1700, but it still remained very small.

TABLE 2  
*Marriage Patterns of Clan MacKenzie, 1500-1900*

	Origin of Wife (Per Cent)		Number of Cases
	Highland	Non- Highland	
1500-1699	92	8	59
1700-1900	62	38	69

The Frasers of Lovat present a more complex picture. By contrast with the MacDonalds and MacKenzies, clans of Gaelic origin, the clan Fraser of Lovat is an offshoot of a Norman Lowland family (Fraser of Philorth 1879: I. vii). Some Gaelic customs were soon adopted, like the fostering of chiefly children with clansmen, but the chiefly line of Fraser of Lovat remained much less integrated into the Highlands than did the MacDonalds or MacKenzies. Marriage patterns demonstrate this point. Seven marriages were contracted with Highland partners by Fraser of Lovat chiefs between 1500 and 1699, and five marriages with non-Highland partners. Between 1700 and 1900 there were two Highland matches and four non-Highland matches.

TABLE 3  
*Marriage Patterns of the Family of Burnett of Leys, 1500-1900*

	Origin of Wife (Per Cent)		Number of Cases
	Highland	Non- Highland	
1500-1699	0	100	16
1700-1900	0	100	18

But if the marriage patterns of chiefs of the main line of clan Fraser show an intention to maintain strong links with non-Highland areas, the marriage patterns of the Highland sections of clan Fraser<sup>6</sup> as a whole show no such intention.

TABLE 4  
*Marriage Patterns of the Family of Frasers of Philorth, 1500-1878*

	Origin of Wife (Per Cent)		Number of Cases
	Highland	Non- Highland	
1500-1699	8	92	12
1700-1878	14	86	14

TABLE 5  
*Marriage Patterns of Clan Fraser of Lovat (including the Highland sections and the Lovat chiefs), 1500-1895*

	Origin of Wife (Per Cent)		Number of Cases
	Highland	Non- Highland	
1500-1699	80	20	64
1700-1875	57	43	105

Table 5 shows there was a stronger tendency to form alliances with non-Highland groups than was the case with the MacDonalds and MacKenzies, but a large part of the difference is accounted for by the idiosyncratic pattern of the main Fraser of Lovat line. If one concentrates on the marriage patterns of cadet branches of the clan living in the

Highlands, then once again it appears that place of residence strongly determined the choice of marriage partners.

Striking support for this thesis is provided by the behaviour of those cadet branches of clan Fraser of Lovat<sup>7</sup> which were settled in non-Highland areas. The Frasers of Strichen and of Inverallochy occupied lands in east Aberdeenshire. Fraser of Reelig tells us that

The Aberdeenshire properties were in character essentially Lowland, even though their Lovat possessors spent much of their time in their own Highland country, and made a point of taking a prominent part in clan affairs. (Fraser of Reelig 1966: 10).

TABLE 6

*Marriage Patterns of Lowland Cadet Families of  
Clan Fraser of Lovat, 1500-1895*

	Origin of Wife (Per Cent)		Number of Cases
	Highland	Non- Highland	
1500-1699	0	100	6
1700-1895	27	73	11

Despite this involvement in the matters of the clan, Table 6 shows that the heads of these cadet branches invariably made marriages with non-Highland partners between 1500 and 1699, and usually made such marriages afterwards. This pattern is much closer to the Lowland Frasers of Philorth than it is to the Highland sections of the Frasers of Lovat: the preference for endogamous marriages that Fox sees to be a mark of the kinship system of Highland clans is heavily outweighed by the advantages to be gained by making alliances through marriage with other Lowland dwellers.

### *Discussion*

The above analysis supports the hypothesis that the Highlands formed an autonomous social and political sector between 1500 and 1700. The Highland boundary not only separated objectively defined differences in language, culture, religion and social organisation, but also divided Scotland into a number of what Barth calls *ethnic groups*: that is, groups created by individuals defining themselves, or being defined by other

people, as having common features with other members of the ethnic group (Barth 1969: 10). The existence of two ethnic groups—Highlanders and Lowlanders—is characteristic of Scotland in the period with which we are concerned. James VI had a clear conception of Highlanders as an ethnic group:

As for the Hie-lands, I shortly comprehend them al into two sorts of people: the one, that dwelleth in our maine land, that are barbarous for the most parte yet mixed with some shawe of civilitie: the other that dwelleth in the Iles and are alluterlie barbares . . . reforme and civilize the best inclined among them, rooting out or transporting the barbarous and stubborn sort and planting civilitie in their roomes (James VI, *Basilikon Doron*, quoted in Smout 1969: 111).

This conception of Highlanders as a different kind of people comes out again and again in the accounts of the travels of Lowland and English visitors. Here is Dr Johnson's impression:

At Nairn we may fix the verge of the Highlands; for here I first saw peat fires, and first heard the *Erse* language (Johnson 1928: 22, original emphasis).

It is less easy to document the Highlanders' perception of Lowlanders as a separate ethnic group, since Gaelic culture was oral, not written. But Johnson notes the unfavourable attitudes still held by Highlanders to Lowlanders in the 1770s:

By their Lowland neighbours they would not willingly be taught; for they have long considered them as a mean and degenerate race. These prejudices are wearing fast away; but so much of them still remains, that when I asked a very learned minister in the islands, which they considered as their most savage clans: '*Those, said he, that live next the Lowlands*' (*Op. cit.*: 31, original emphasis).

Residence in the Highland area or the Lowland area (and, we may suggest, the North area) thus involved belonging to an ethnic group, in Barth's terms, before the social and political incorporation of the Highlands into Scotland. But the existence of a relatively impermeable social boundary between Highland and non-Highland areas demonstrated above does not mean that the boundary was equally impermeable in spheres of life other than the social. Economic historians have emphasised the economic flows that crossed the boundary, with exports of Highland cash crops (notably black cattle) paying for needed imports of grain, iron and, in some areas, timber (Gray 1957: 42–9). The existence of economic links does not necessarily imply any other form of linkage (Barth 1969: 16–17). Indeed, economic links by themselves may not mean that non-economic differences between sectors will grow less important, as economic historians suggest (Smout 1969: 345): rather, economic contacts at the boundary may emphasise how different in social, cultural, and other matters are the members of different ethnic groups, and so serve to consolidate social and cultural differences (Barth 1969: 15–16). Thus, interaction at the boundary of Highland and non-Highland sectors may be seen to reinforce the definition of the sectors.



The analysis presented earlier in this paper shows that, by and large, from 1500–1700 there was a strong statistical relationship between residence in the Highland area and marriage within that area. A similar strong relationship holds for Lowland marriage and Lowland residence. In these situations there is no conflict between ethnic group membership (taking residence in the Highlands or in the Lowlands as a measure of ethnic group membership) and objective criteria like language, culture and religion. But a case like that of the Lowland cadet branches of the Frasers of Lovat allows one to examine a situation of conflict between ethnic group membership and clan membership. One would predict, from the literature on clanship and from Fraser of Reelig's emphasis on the important part in clan affairs played by the heads of these branches, that the marriage patterns of these branches would resemble the patterns of Highland sections of the clans: in fact Table 6 shows that this most definitely is not so. This is an intriguing result, and it suggests that further work by historical sociologists and anthropologists on the wealth of genealogical material that exists for Scottish clans and families might provide insights which would be useful not only for students of Scottish history but also for the comparative analysis of kinship.

## NOTES

- 1 The sources used to determine the place of residence were Groome 1903, Johnston 1958, and Johnston 1934.
- 2 Source of data for the MacDonalds of Sleat, Kingsburgh, Castleton, Vallay, Glengarry, Scotus, Leek, Greenfield, Clanranald, Glenaladale, Kinlochmoidart, Boisdale, Sanda, Keppoch, and Dalchosnie, the MacDonells of Greenfield and the MacEachainn-MacDonalds: MacKenzie 1881.
- 3 Source of data for the MacKenzies of Kintail and Seaforth, Assynt, Kildun, Kinchulladrum, Pluscardine, Earnside, Allangrange, Inchcoulter, Dundonnell, Kinnoch and Putlindue, Redcastle, Kinraig, Ord, Davochmaluag, Kilchrist and Suddie, Inverlael, Hilton, Brae, Achilty, Ardross, Fairburn, Tolly, the later MacKenzies of Seaforth, and Colin MacKenzie, Governor of Ellandonan: Warrand 1965.
- 4 Source of data for the Deeside Burnetts, Burnetts of Craigmyle, Kemnay, Crimond, Monboddo, and the Ramsays of Balmain: G. Burnett 1950.
- 5 Source of data for the Frasers of Cowie, Durris and Philorth, Philorth, Fraserfield, Lonmay, Park, and the Abernethies of Philorth: Fraser of Philorth 1879.
- 6 Source of data for the Frasers of Lovat, Brae, Farraline, Erchilt, Balnain, Leadclune, Gortuleg, Culduthel, Castle Leathers, Culbockie and Guisachan, Belladrum, Achnagairn, Stucy, Eskadale, Ardachy, Boblainy, Fairfield, Foyers, Reelick, Dunballoch and Newton, Phopachy and Torbeck, and the Fraser-Tytters of Aldourie: MacKenzie 1896, checked wherever possible by reference to Warrand 1934.
- 7 Source of data for the Frasers of Inverallochy and of Strichen, as in note 6.

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