

Early Scottish Edged Weapons and Related Militaria

By Howard Mesnard

As a novice collector of antiques, I am often puzzled as to the origin of the piece. The true value will vary considerably depending upon where the item was made. I'm sure most of us have had the disappointing experience of realizing it's not what we thought it was after we have proudly shown a new acquisition to someone more knowledgeable.

One seldom has this problem with Scottish antiques, especially weapons. Think about the uniqueness of the bagpipe music, the plaids and dress, the snuff mulls, and the whisky.

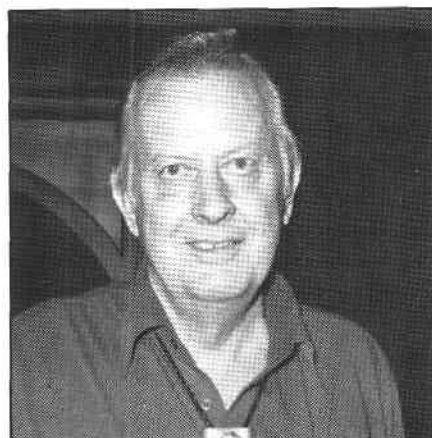
The reason for this originality was that, historically, the Scots had little commerce with the outside world. They were farmers and herdsmen, not traders or seafarers. They seldom left their homeland and their main contact with the outside world was fighting off invaders. This started with the invasion by the Romans shortly after the death of Christ.

By 100 A.D., the Romans had conquered most of the British Isles except Scotland. Early in the second century, the Emperor Hadrian built his great wall across England along what is today the approximate Scottish border; parts are still standing. The wall, about 12 feet tall and 10 feet thick at the parapet, was built to protect England from "the barbarians from the north."

Apparently the Romans, used to the close-order method of fighting in columns, could not cope with the guerrilla tactics of these early Scots. One account describes a formation of Roman invaders being attacked by these "barbarians" who descended upon them like a swarm of bees. They ambushed the Romans, then disappeared into the woods as suddenly as they had appeared. Due to problems throughout their Empire, the Romans left Britain during the 3rd and 4th centuries.

The Norsemen invaded and fought the Scots for most of the next thousand years but, like the Romans, lost more battles than they won. During this time, the Scots banded into clans, located for the most part in the Highlands, led by chieftans who were usually large landowners. The serfs, who worked the land, were the chief's own private army. When the clans were not fighting a common enemy, the invader, they were usually fighting among themselves.

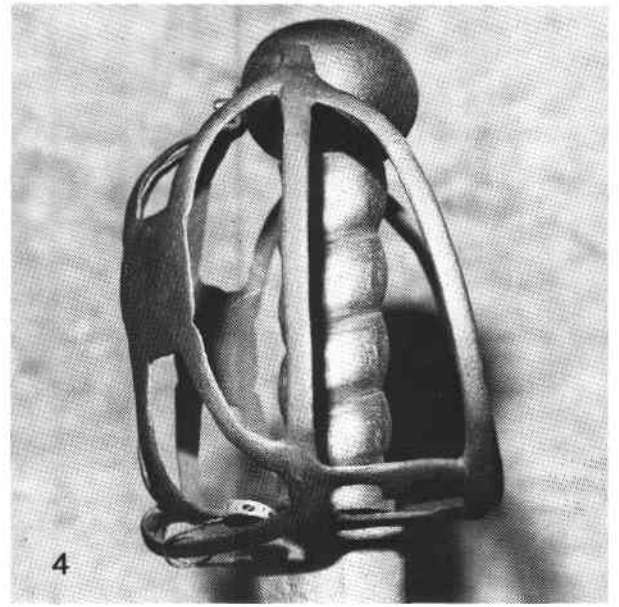
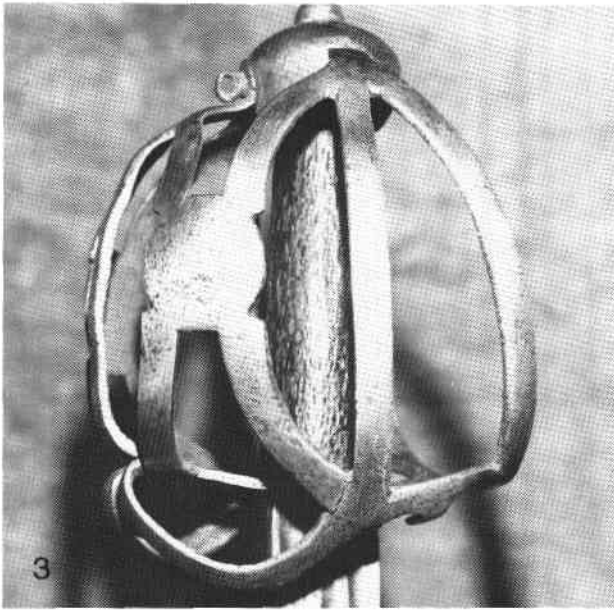
By the end of the Dark Ages, the Crusades were over and the English monarchs had brought some degree of law and order to their own country. As every-day life became more organized at home, these kings, too, endeavored to conquer the unruly Scots and subject them to English rule and taxation. For the next five hundred years, almost all the English monarchs sent expeditions north to subdue these ferocious clansmen. Many attempts ended in failure, not only because the Scots were such fierce fighters, but also the old story of fighting to protect one's family and home.



With the death of Elizabeth I, queen of England, in 1603, the throne of both Scotland and England became occupied by the first of the Stuarts, King James I, who had been James VI of Scotland. With the union of the two nations relative peace existed between the two countries, at least in the south, until the death of the last of the house of Stuart, Queen Anne, in 1714. The succession fell to the Hanoverians; George I became the monarch of Great Britain. A German king was odious to the Scots, mainly the Highlanders who followed the standard of the Earl of Mar into armed revolt. The attempt to bring the great-grandson of James I to the British throne was unsuccessful as the rebellion was quickly crushed in 1715 by veteran British regiments who had served under the Duke of Marlborough. Another uprising in the Highlands occurred in 1745, when another Stuart, Prince Charles Edward, also known as "Bonnie Prince Charlie", gathered the clans around him and set out south in an invasion of England. Without the support of dissident English in the north and short of supplies, the Highlanders were forced to retreat into Scotland. In April of the following year, the Highlanders were decisively defeated at the battle of Culloden, a battle that lasted only a few hours. The English, led by the Duke of Cumberland, showed little mercy to the enemy wounded, many of which lay unattended for days on the battlefield. Similar in cruelty was the pursuit of the clansmen, but the Highlands were finally subjugated.

With this heritage of almost perpetual warfare, it is no wonder that the Scots, especially the Highlanders, developed very effective weapons and used them very well.

Before going into specific Scottish weapons, let us explore a bit of what is known about early Continental armorers and blade makers. During the 16th century, except for the monks and a few scholars, the population of Europe was basically illiterate. Monks painstakingly copied or wrote on ecclesiastical subjects, while scholars pursued their own, usually scientific, subjects. Only artists documented the armorer

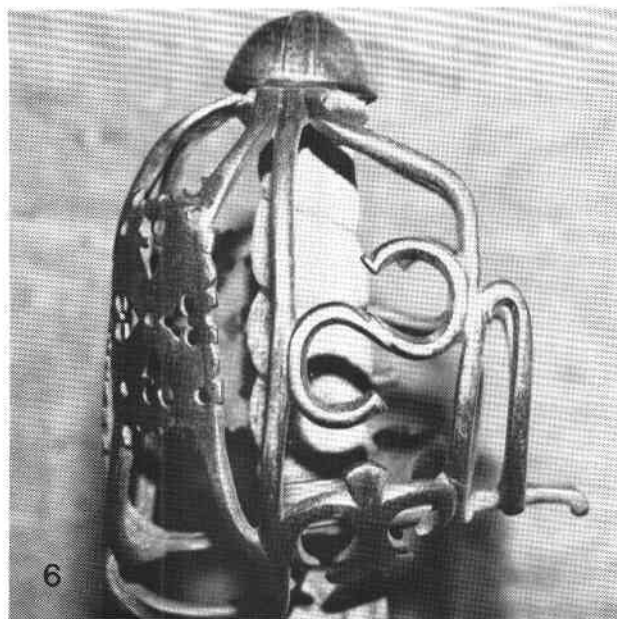
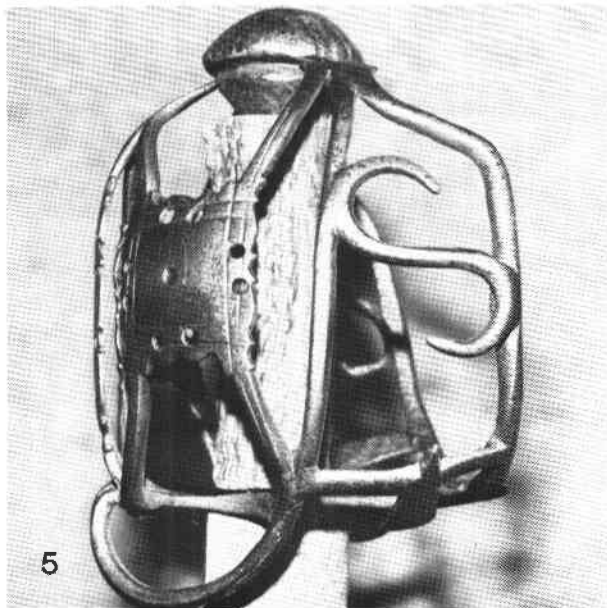


working in his shop. From these fragments, gleaned from tapestries, paintings and drawings, we learn that the armorer led a solitary life. His shop was usually isolated from town. It was a nocturnal business and usually a family affair to protect the secrets of the trade. He did not welcome visitors. All through the night, the villagers could hear the ring of the anvil, and see sparks from the chimney of the forge which led to a certain mystique about the trade. The reason for this unsociable way of life was basic. The secret of producing good blades was in the composition and temper of the steel. This could best be determined in total darkness by the color of the blade as it was removed from the forge. The armorer capitalized on this aura of mysticism by marking his sword blades with magic symbols. These were reputed to make the owner more formidable in battle and superior to any with an unmarked blade. Some of these magic marks were astrological symbols, as astrology was accepted as a science during the 15th and 16th centuries. The number seven was always considered lucky; so multiples of it, especially 1414, were very popular. I have seen several blades with 1441, which indicates the proper digits were more important than the sequence.

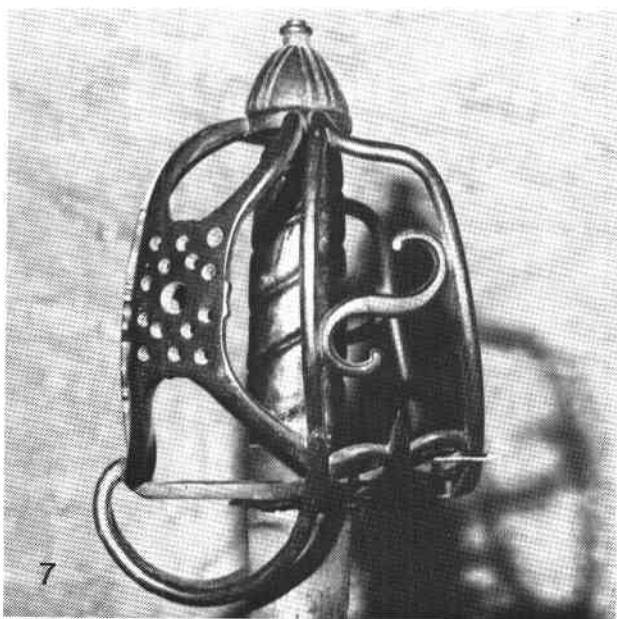
The name, Andrea Ferrara, spelled at least seven other ways, appears on more blades than any other name. There is no hard evidence that there ever was such a man¹ but early legends recount that he was a great blade maker from either Italy or Spain. One story alleges that Ferrara murdered his apprentice for spying on him while he was tempering a blade. As the lad was popular in the village, Ferrara had to escape prosecution by fleeing to Scotland where he continued his blade making.

The earliest recognizable Scottish swords are shown on tomb slabs and effigies dating from the 15th century. These swords have simple cross-guards with quillons that slope towards the point. The length of the grip indicates they were to be used with one hand. At the end of the century or into the next the more familiar *claidheamh-mor* (great

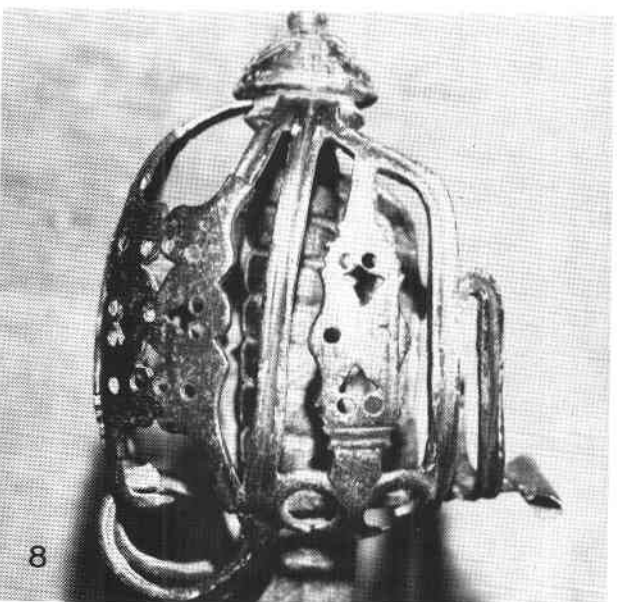
¹(Ferro, iron; whence Andrea Ferrara, Ferrario, etc., Andrew the iron-worker. Ed.)



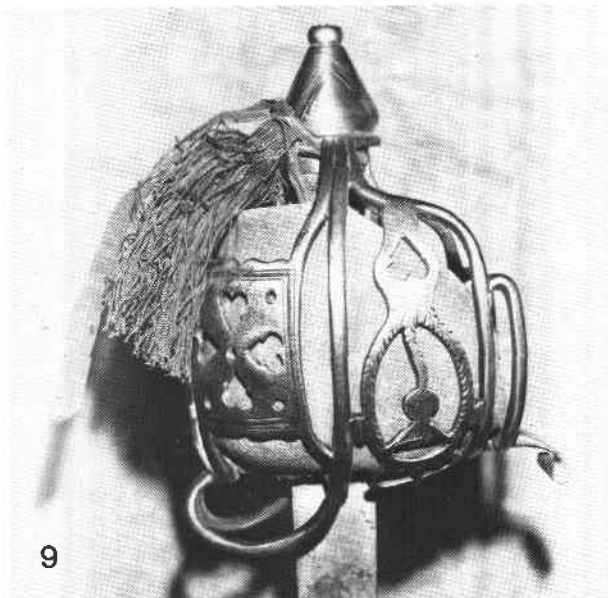
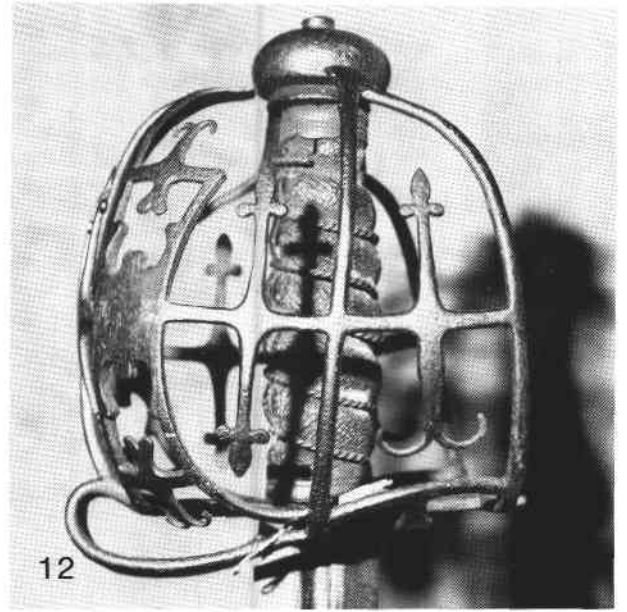
5 sword), the true "claymore", gripped with both hands, had evolved. The first claymores also had sloping quillons but with a decorative quatrefoil at each end. In the second half of the 16th century, another claymore developed. Often referred to as the "Lowland" type, the sword's cross guard was mounted at right angles to the blade with the ends bent sharply to the point; the terminals were knob-shaped. Usually small open ring guards are in evidence on either side of the quillon block. The blades of these two-handed swords were usually between three and a half and five feet in length. Around 1600, a hand-and-a-half sword made its appearance. This type had large shell guards on each side of the grip and narrow, flattened quillons that curved slightly towards the blade. Specimens of the above swords are extremely rare and most examples are in museum collections.



The first Scottish basket-hilted swords date from the second half of the 16th century and apparently were known as "Highland guards." They were made up of flat strips of forge welded iron, thus giving the design another name: the "ribbon hilt." Figures 1 and 2 are examples of the later form of the ribbon hilt and date from the third quarter of the seventeenth century. The branches of the guard are welded to a half ring which in turn fits into a groove cut in the pommel. The earlier form, very similar in style, has a pommel with three separate slots to accommodate the corresponding ends of the guard's branches. As a rule the quillons extend one to three inches outside the guard and are counter-curved on the earlier type. The quillons of the later form were shortened to a short stub, especially the one in front of the guard, thus giving rise to the term, "beak nose." Neither blade of these illustrated examples is thought to be original to their respective hilt as contemporary blades at this time favored by the Scots were often close to three inches wide at the hilt and were sometimes made with three wide fullers.



Before proceeding, I would like to mention the blades used in Scottish swords. The Scots had realized that the invaders from abroad usually had better sword blades than their own. Enterprising European merchants, especially in the German



states, capitalized on this; higher quality double- and single-edged blades were imported to Scotland in large quantities and hilted locally. About twenty years ago, skin divers found wreckage of a 17th century ship off the Scottish coast with the remains of several thousand sword blades in the hold. The Scots were always a thrifty lot and broken swords were repaired or rebladed by local armorers.

Figures 3 and 4 are examples of a basket-hilt type dating from the first half of the 17th century and usually considered to have been fabricated in England. The guard is made up of a series of vertical bars and two small, square panels. The pommel is usually ball- or ovoid-shaped; the front branch of the guard is secured to the pommel by means of a screw in nearly all examples I have encountered. This design has been illustrated as it bears a superficial relationship to figures 5 through 9 which are early examples of the Scottish "traditional" or "conventional" hilt which appears to have evolved around 1700 or slightly before, and has come down to us in the present day, with few structural changes, in a form used by officers in Highland regiments.

Some collectors call figures 5 through 7 "S" hilts. There is no evidence that the "S" stood for Stirling, Scotland, Stuart, or anything else. In fact the late form of the ribbon hilt (figures 1 and 2) has an "S"-shaped piece which is attractive and acts as a structurally sound spacer. These hilts date from the early 18th century.

Figure 8 is commonly called a "Glasgow hilt" as the vertical bars are grooved - a design utilized by known Glasgow sword makers from circa 1715 until after mid-century. It appears that Scottish armorers within a geographical area usually fabricated similar style guards like Pennsylvania rifle makers. On this specimen the panels are pierced with arrow-point and circle designs.

I call figure 9 the "Thistle hilt" as a representation of a crowned thistle appears in the outboard (right) side plate. Unfortunately I am unable to determine the significance of this device. It was occasionally used by Walter Allan, sword maker of Stirling (see figure 10), on hilts also having

secret Jacobite emblems such as butterflies and oak leaves. The crowned thistle is also associated with some Highland regiments raised by the government. Major H.J. Parkyn (*Shoulder-Belt Plates And Buttons*, Aldershot, 1956, p. 209) refers to this as "An old device of the Black Watch - was displayed on the Colours in 1747."

Figure 10 is an ornate hilt signed with the initials of Walter Allan of Stirling who was working from 1732 until 1760. He is considered the most creative and imaginative hilt maker in Scotland and rarely made conventional-type hilts. Allan's work is typified by "wiggly" bars and a fancy open-work panel in the front section of the guard. His father and brother, both named John, fabricated hilts of traditional design although often these were inlaid with brass or silver in the form of circles, hatching, interlace, etc.

Figure 11 is a Border Warden's sword, circa 1750. After Culloden, the English recruited many Scots for military service, which included border patrols to apprehend smugglers who were reluctant to pay English taxes.

Figure 12 is an ornate officer's sword, circa 1750. The delicate and artistic workmanship indicate the maker, who was probably English, was an outstanding craftsman.

Figure 13 was the standard sword issued, circa 1770-1780, to privates in the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment, commonly known as the Black Watch. The regiment saw extensive action in North America before and during the Revolutionary War. These swords were made in England by Jeffreys and Drury and were alleged to be of inferior workmanship to many early Scottish swords. The poor quality of these blades was debated in Parliament at length after the troops complained bitterly that the enemy was better equipped than Britain's Finest.

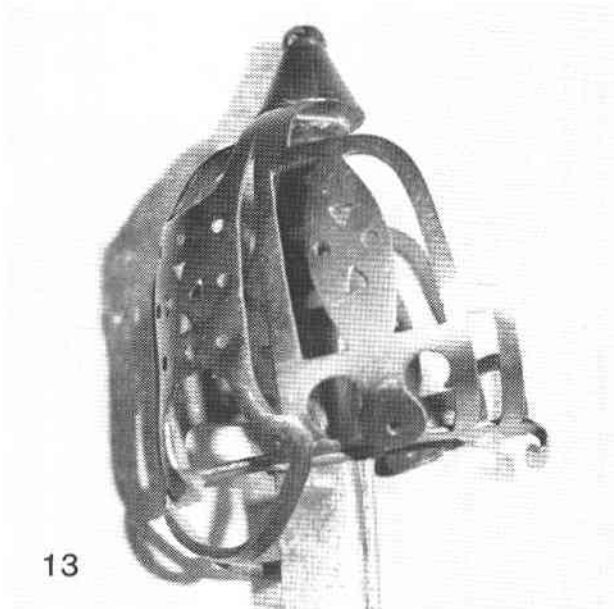
Figure 14 was issued to the Breadalbane Fencibles raised in 1794 and disbanded a few years later. Other Volunteer and Fencible regiments used similar hilt forms and I have seen at least three different insignia engraved on the exterior of the guard.

Figure 15 is a brass hilt issued from 1798 until 1828 to officers in Highland regiments. I estimate that approximately 15% of all Scottish basket-hilts were made of brass. Some, including a few hilts made by Robert Craig of Glasgow who began working in 1721, predate the battle of Culloden. I am not aware of any articles outlining the advantages or disadvantages of steel vs. brass, other than the obvious, i.e., brass is non-corrosive and easier for the foundryman to work.

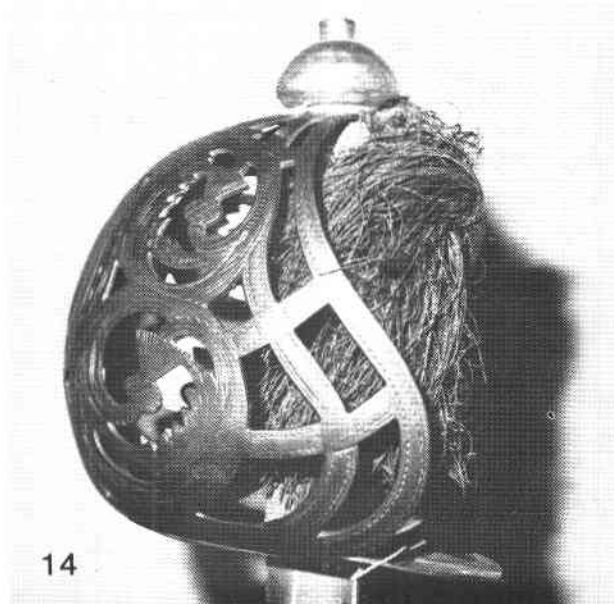
Figures 16 and 17 are of a solid silver hilt and scabbard which is a most interesting sword. The inscription engraved on the scabbard, which unfortunately is spurious, reads:

"Presented to Sir Thomas Sheridan, Kt. by His Royal Highness Prince Charles Edward Stuart, lawful Heir to the throne of Great Britain, Ireland, France, etc., in the presence of the Chevalier de St. George, Visc. Strathallan, Lords Nairn, George Murray, Kilmarnock, Cromarty, and Balmarino, at our palace of Holyrood, Edinburgh, 1745. Semper Fidelis Secret et Hardi."

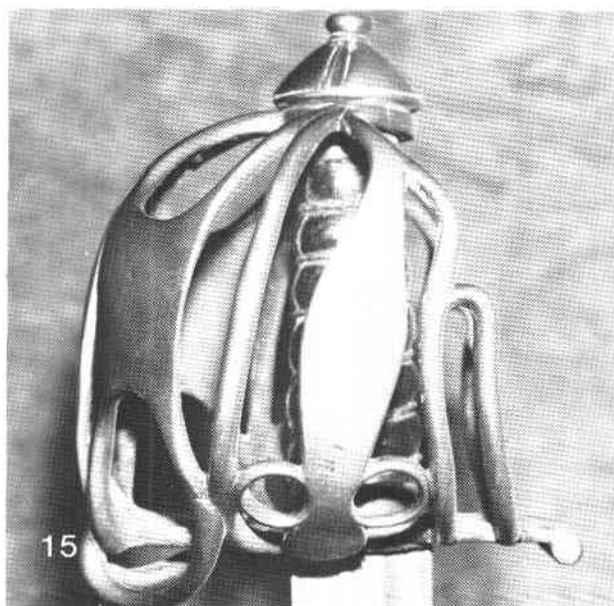
The "Chevalier de St. George" was a name assumed by James Francis Edward Stuart, the Old Pretender and father of Bonnie Prince Charlie. During the uprising of the "45" the "Chevalier" remained safely in France. With the sword



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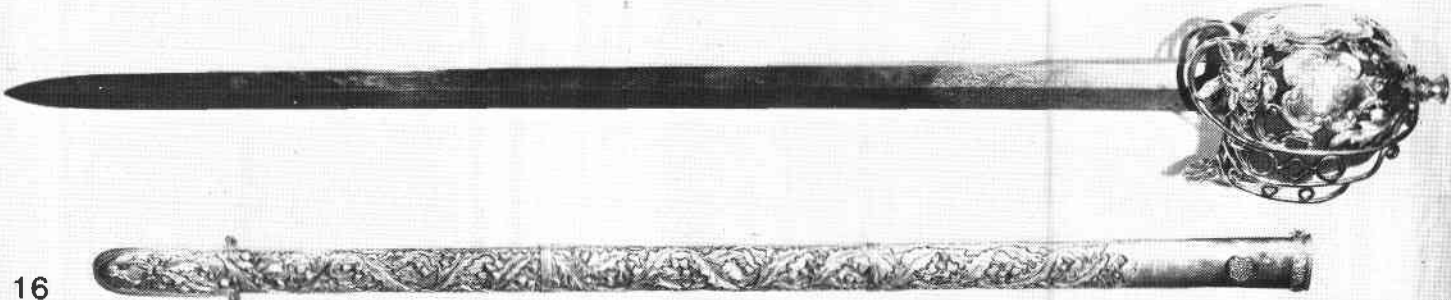


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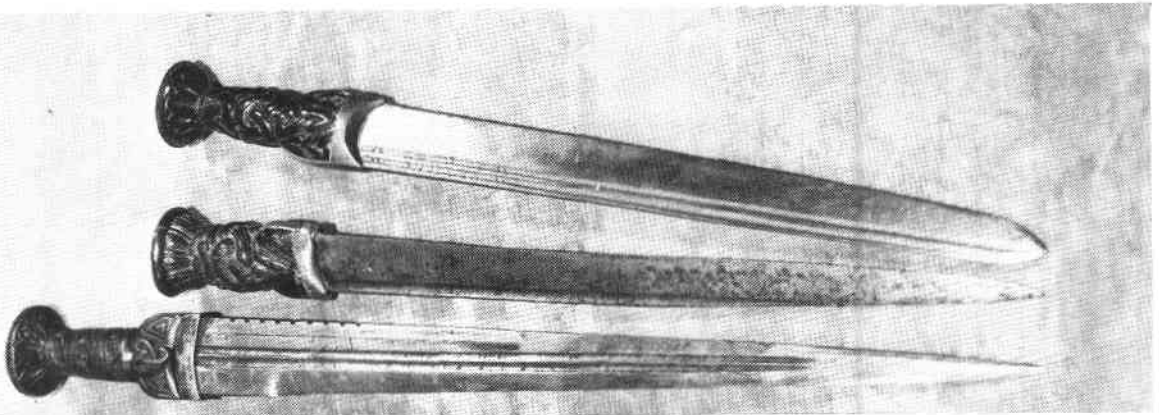
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were documents, the earliest dating 1889, stating that the Earl of Mar had just presented Bonnie Prince Charlie's sword to the former's only son on his twenty-first birthday. At a later date, the sword was lent to the Victoria & Albert Museum. In 1920, the son, now Lord Garioch, presented the sword to a prominent Washington socialite, Daisy Calhoun. It has been in this country ever since.

With a great deal of help from experts at the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, H.M. Tower Armouries, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and others, we pretty much agree on the following: this sword and two others with similar engraved presentations were probably made circa 1840 during the "Celtic Revival" period. Suits of armor and early weapons were in demand but in short supply; so artisans "materialized" to meet the need. There were seven clan chiefs, (historians call them "The Seven Men of Moidart") who strongly supported Prince Charles when he landed in Scotland in 1745. Extensive research indicates each of the three silver hilted swords referred to made their appearance circa 1840 in shops or at auction in the vicinity of the heirs of these seven supporters! What wealthy Scottish aristocrat wouldn't pay dearly for a silver sword presented to his ancestor by the Bonnie Prince? Perhaps the other four swords are still out there, somewhere!

Figure 18: dirks, mid-18th century - during this period every able-bodied male carried a dirk with him at all times. Even while working the fields, one might leave his sword and rest under a tree, but the dirk was always at hand as smoldering clan feuds might ignite at any time. Dirk blades were often made from broken swords. Hilts were normally blackthorn or heather root, carved with Celtic

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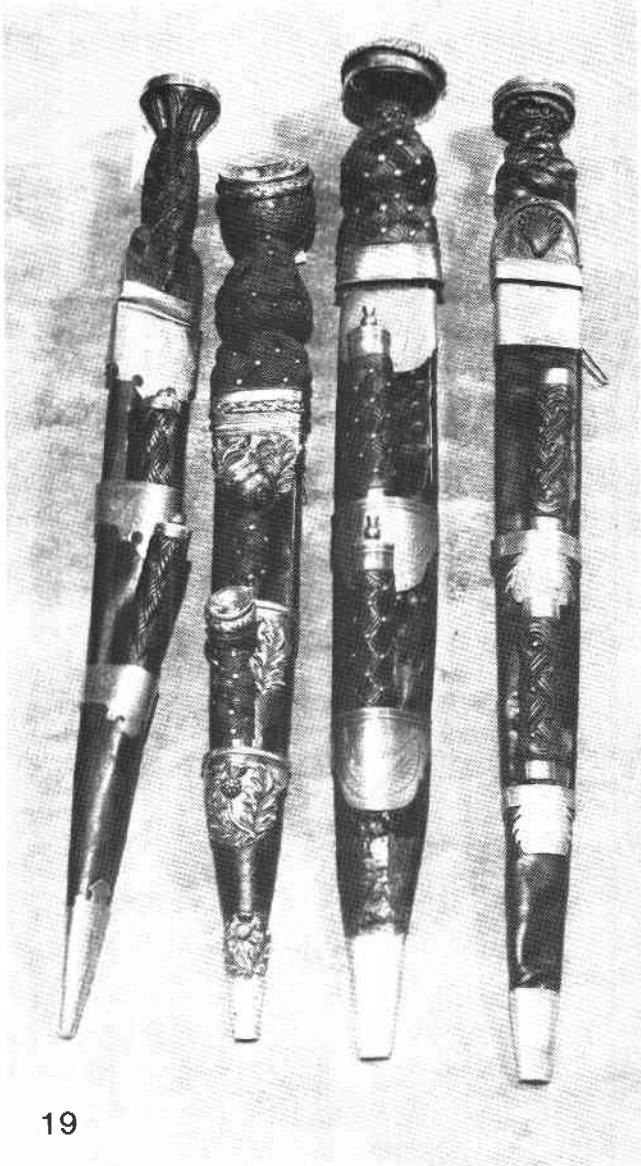
symbols or interlaced design. Dirks normally had flat pommels, cylindrical grips, and round haunches. Blades were normally single-edged.

Figure 19: Victorian period dirks - after 1800, the dirk became more decorative as it was no longer needed for fighting. Historians refer to the "decadent dirk Period" when the grips and sheaths were embellished with ostentatious silver trim and large cairngorm (smokey quartz) stones set into the pommel.

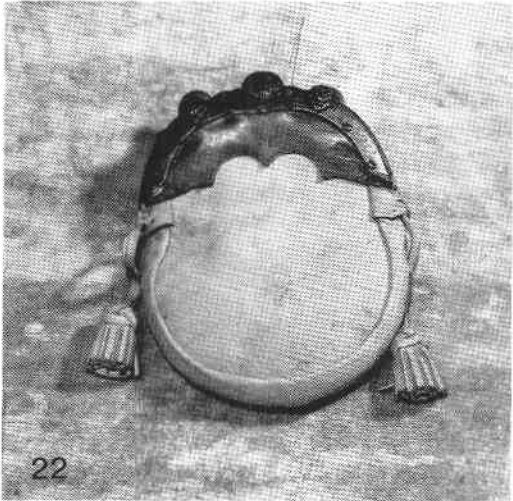
Figure 20: "Skene dhu" is Gaelic for black (hilted) knife. These small knives became popular during the Victorian era and were worn at the calf in knee-length hose.

Figure 21: the origin of the Lochaber Axe is lost in antiquity. However, it was popular during the 17th and 18th centuries. A foot soldier armed with this axe would have a good chance when confronted by a hostile horseman.

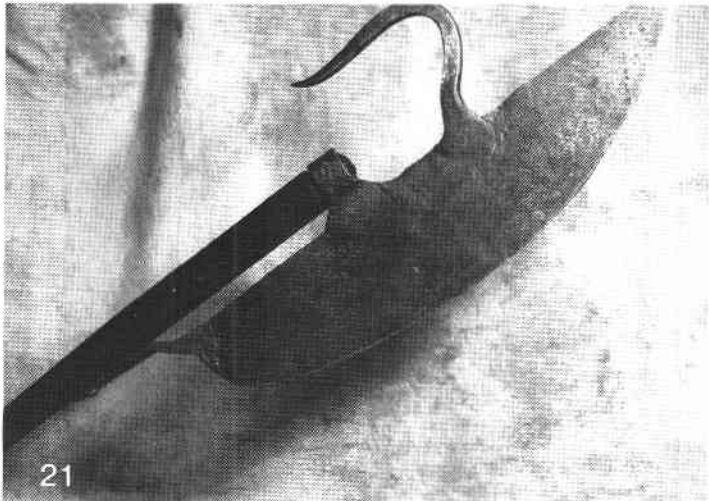
Figure 22 is a steel-mounted sporrán from Nuremburg, 17th century. Craftsmen, who created the steel Armada chests with intricate secret locking devices, were capable of making such a piece. The masks conceal buttons that must be pushed in the proper direction and sequence in order to open the purse.



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Figure 23 shows an officer's silver gorget and shoulder-belt plate of the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment, the Black Watch. According to Parkyn, *op cit*, p. 210, the latter was worn c. 1786-1790. It has the regimental number within a ring surmounted by St. Andrew and his cross together with the motto *Nemo me impune lacessit*. The gorget is engraved with the crowned cypher of George III and "42 R H".

Figure 24 illustrates two Victorian powder horns but neither were made to hold powder. They are purely decorative and about as useful as epaulets.

Figure 25: Commemorative or honorary medals are at least as old as the Greek and Roman Empires. They often depicted the conquering hero on one side and a reference to the decisive battle on the other. The English continued this practice and expanded the distribution in proportion to the significance of the battle. Very decisive victories justified many medals, usually gold for the general officers, silver for field grade, and bronze for junior officers. After Lord Nelson's eventful victory at Trafalgar in 1805, pewter medals were issued to enlisted men, which was quite unusual. All were stamped from the same die.

Shown here are six medals issued by the English to commemorate their decisive defeat of the Highlanders at Culloden on April 16, 1746. The Duke of Cumberland is shown on one side of each while the reverse depicts a commemorative scene. The quality of these medals differs a great deal as each was designed and paid for by separate individuals. The best quality were made by Kirk, Pingo, and Yeo, all jewelers, silversmiths, and engravers. The poorest was made by Pinchbeck who was also a toymaker. The donors were high ranking officers who were often personally rewarded with grants of property and/or titles from the reigning monarch. Medals were tokens of appreciation to subordinates to recognize a job well done. No records are available regarding the number of Culloden medals issued but their scarcity indicates the total of all styles was probably less than a thousand. All depict Cumberland as the conquering hero. The reverse of one shows a battlefield covered with bodies with the legend, "Rebellion Justly Rewarded". In Scotland today, Cumberland is still referred to as the "Bloody Butcher".

