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The Piper of Duntrune

The Highlands have long been known for chilling tales of ghostly apparitions and haunted castles. One of the more enduring legends is connected to Duntrune Castle in Argyll, currently the home of the Malcolm Clan. This castle was built in the 12th Century and is one of the oldest continually occupied castles in the Highlands. Robin Malcolm, the current chief of the MacCallum/Malcolm Clan of Poltalloch lands, firmly believes the castle is haunted by the ghost of a piper whose life came to a violent end more than 400 years ago.

In the 17th century a civil war broke out in England that had a religious basis to the strife. Charles the 1st had a disagreement with parliament, over his attempts to impose higher taxes, and an Anglican form of worship. At first the Scots had tried to stay out of this war, but it became sharply divided along religious lines, and Scotland was drawn into the fray. The Kings Scottish army was supported by the Robertsons, Stewarts, Ogilvies, Grahams, Gordons, MacDonalds, MacLeans, MacNabs, and Camerons. Their leader was the military genius, James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose. The Covenant (Parliamentarians) army was led by the powerful Archibald Campbell, the Marquis of Argyll. This led to an armed conflict in the Highlands between the MacDonalds and the Clan Campbell.

The MacDonalds were led by Sir Alistar MacDonald, also known as the dreaded Colkitto. He was 6 feet 6 inches tall and could easily cleave a man in two with one stroke of a claymore. Colkitto became a master of hit and run guerrilla tactics and defeated the Covenant armies in seven battles. In the process Colkitto had helped the Clan MacIntyre of Glen Coe, and as a reward for this assistance, the Clan Chief gave Colkitto his favorite piper to accompany him on his battle campaign.

Colkitto continued his march through Argyll eventually arriving at Duntrune Castle. In a daring night raid, his men surprised and defeated the Campbell defenders. The piper and a small band of Colkittos men were left to garrison the castle while he boarded his galley and sailed away to meet with other Royalists. Before Colkitto could return, the Campbell's mounted a counterattack on Duntrune, and the castle fell to the band of Campbell's. In an act of vengeance, the Campbell's killed all of Colkittos men except the MacIntyre piper, who was ordered to play for the amusement of his captors.

The Campbell's impatiently waited for Colkitto to return to Duntrune. Finally, one day his galley came into view in the Sound of Jura, and the clever piper asked permission to play a tune on the pipes that he had created for the occasion - so they bid him to play on. The piper took his place high on the castle ramparts and began playing "Piobaireachd-dhum-Naomhaid", or as it is known, "The Piper's Warning to His Master". Colkitto listened closely, and noticed mistakes missed phrases that were unusual for such an accomplished piper. Waving a grateful salute to the brave piper, he ordered the helm hard about and escaped to the open sea.

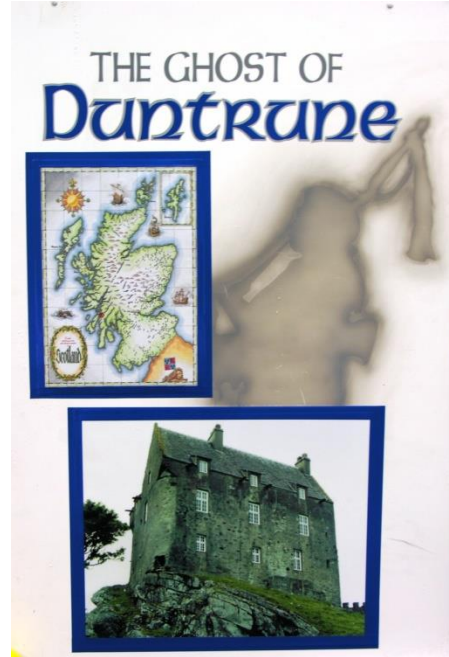


Image courtesy of Don and Joan Malcolm

The piper was taken before the commander of the castle, Lady Dunstaffnage, known as "the black bitch", and confronted with the treachery. She gave orders that the piper's hands be cut off so that "He will never again give a similar warning'. The exhausted piper extended his hands, and the Campbell's watched as these nimble hands that played so well were severed from his arms with a single blow from a chopping axe. Unable to stop the flow of blood, the piper soon died. Over the years many inhabitants of the castle have claimed to witness strange phenomena. Some have even heard the music of the piper of Duntrune. Skeptics scoffed, believing that this was just another Scottish ghost story.

Then, in 1888, while making repairs to Duntrune Castle, workers unearthed a skull beneath the first-floor dressing room. When they dug further, they found the skeletal remains of a man buried in a shallow grave. They carefully removed the skull, torso, legs, feet, arms, and made a remarkable discovery - there were no hands. The master of the castle at the time, Reginald Mapleton, rector of St. Columbia's Poltalloch and Dean of the Scottish Episcopal Church's diocese of Argyll and The Isles, ordered the body buried outside the castle walls. He arranged for a Christian burial. A great-granddaughter of Dean Mapleton, informed Robin Malcolm in a letter, that her mother, who would have been five years old when the body was discovered, claimed that the piper's remains were laid to rest in an unmarked grave in Kilmartin churchyard.

If you stand below the castle late at night, you might see a ghostly apparition through the mist of a lone piper on the battlements facing towards the sea, and if you listen carefully, you may hear the haunting sounds of "Piobaireachd-dhun-Naomhaig" echoing across the still waters of the Sound of Jura. Perhaps the piper is still playing his warning, to all who will listen, of the dangers that lie within the ancient walls of the Castle Duntrune.