

Obituary

Marion Campbell of Kilberry

Marion Campbell was the last survivor of a remarkable generation of female heads of historic Argyll families, all born during or shortly after the First World War. Lord Cockburn in 1843 was astonished that the Laird of Kilberry chose to rebuild the ruined castle on the bleak western edge of his estate, ‘because it was the family place!’ John Campbell’s great-grand-daughter shared his devotion to the *dùthchas* [heritage]. Born on 16 December 1919, she was brought to Kilberry Castle from London at the age of a few weeks. She lived there for most of her life and in June 2000 was laid to rest in the mausoleum built in 1733 by Captain Dugald Campbell, ‘the privateer’.



Of military descent through both parents, she served between 1938 and 1944 in the ATS and WRNS, acquiring accounting skills which were to serve her well in farm-management and in the systematic arrangement of archaeological data. She served on her local district council for nearly 20 years until 1975, latterly as chairwoman and from 1961 as a representative of the Scottish National Party.

Thus far, a career which matched those of her redoubtable contemporaries, but in the early 1950s Marion Campbell made the decision which was to bring her an honorary fellowship of the Society. After managing a market-garden and three estate farms since 1944, she began to sell them off and to pursue her early enthusiasm for archaeology, history and creative writing. A Fellow of the Society since 1949, her knowledge expanded rapidly through friendships with visiting scholars such as Eric Cregeen and Jack Scott, who helped her place local studies in an international context. But she also brought to them profound knowledge of the topography and history of the area, including the contents of the rich Kilberry archive, and the practical experience of a farmer who seemingly knew every shepherd and gamekeeper in Mid Argyll, and could recount her conversations with them 30 years later. In the upkeep of the castle and in archaeological fieldwork alike she shared the company of Mary Sandeman, an old school-friend who came to visit in 1954 and stayed until her death in 1995. Mary's father had been the doctor on Jura in the 1920s, and as well as a series of charming published recollections this led to an archaeological survey of the island. For practical reasons this was never completed, but it was a valuable tool for the Royal Commission's survey 20 years later, and Sandy Buie's recorded observation of stones in his peat-bank at Cùl a'Bhaile was to lead to J B Stevenson's excavation of a Bronze Age house. Marion Campbell's own excavations included a group of short cist burials at Clachbreck and the meticulous sifting of 19th-century spoil from St Columba's Cave, Ellary, producing important finds to add to the numerous stray flints and pottery from forestry ploughing. Always determined to share her knowledge with the people of the area, Marion took a leading part in the foundation of the Natural History and Antiquarian Society of Mid Argyll in 1953–4 and the establishment of the Auchindrain Folk Museum in the early 1960s.

The fruit of many years' fieldwork was published by Marion Campbell and Mary Sandeman as 'Mid Argyll: an archaeological survey' in volume 95 of the *Proceedings* for 1961–2. Described by Charles Thomas as 'one of the really outstanding field surveys of our generation', it combines scholarly classification, concise but acute descriptions of the monuments and their topography, and a column of 'remarks' whose contents are a major source for the history and folk traditions of the region. Even more than the published survey, their annotated six-inch maps show the tireless labours of the two authors in the irregular terrain of Mid Argyll, visiting remote caves and hundreds of 'houses and huts' which were briefly but perceptively classified in an innovative section of the survey. Another valuable list of 'sites checked for forts', on the basis of appearance or place-name, saved future investigators much effort. The 'sites with historic traditions' are illustrated with a wealth of social history and folklore, and a selection of post-Reformation buildings extends the range of the survey to include 18th-century bridges and mansions. The substantial list of finds with which the survey concludes again ranges from the Mesolithic to the early modern period.

Not content with scholarly publication of her results, Marion Campbell produced in 1962 the first of several editions of a popular booklet, *Mid Argyll: a handbook of history*, which set the monuments in a historical framework. A more substantial work of 1977, *Argyll: the enduring heartland*, interspersed archaeological and historical chapters with folk-traditions and the author's poems, and won a wide public. Her earliest published work was *The Wide Blue Road* (1957), the first of four historical stories for children, and in 1973 she published *The Dark Twin*, a

complex novel of royalty and ritual in a prehistoric society. In 1971 the Mid Argyll Society initiated its journal, *The Kist*, of which Marion Campbell was to be founding editor and principal contributor, with a stream of articles on archaeology, folklore, history and natural history. Many of these were based on her family archives, notably the account books of the 18th-century improving landlord Archibald Campbell of Knockbuy and a series of extracts from the diaries of her grandfather, 'Old Kilberry'. The careful annotation and identifications in these articles were repeated in her last years in the editing of 'Letters by the Packet', a remarkable collection of correspondence to and from Campbell relatives in Jamaica for over a century from 1728.

The Royal Commission began work on the *Argyll Inventory* at about the time that the Mid Argyll survey was published, and because of its authoritative nature this was the last part of the county to be inventoried. When the Commission's investigators began work in her area in the 1980s, Marion Campbell was a continuous source of support and information about sites and people. Tea in the great drawing-room of Kilberry Castle might include the magic words, 'Did I never show you . . . ?', to be followed by the display of some invaluable document, map or artefact. Field-visits, with conferences or privately, were enriched by Marion's acute observation and knowledge of the terrain. On one memorable visit to Eilean Mór, accompanied by the shepherd and his dogs, the remains of cultivation were carefully examined to find a vacant area where a warden's hut might be placed, for Marion was one of the trustees on behalf of the island's owners, the Scottish National Party.

Marion Campbell was made an Honorary Fellow of the Society in 1988. Two years later she and Mary Sandeman moved to a smaller house on the edge of the policies, and they took pleasure in the presence of her cousin's young family in Kilberry Castle. Their view west included the Sound of Jura, which until 1266 was the boundary between Scottish and Norwegian territory, and Marion was particularly interested in Alexander III who reclaimed the Hebrides for Scotland. Despite a heart attack in 1991, she completed her biography of the king, and after a frustrating search for a publisher, it appeared in 1999. Other books were reprinted in this decade, including a revised edition of *Argyll: the enduring heartland*, and the possibility of making films of several of them was proposed. She also catalogued and annotated many of the Kilberry Papers before transferring them to Argyll and Bute Council Archive, and worked on 'Letters by the Packet'. A few months before her death she accompanied a young neighbour to examine a late medieval graveslab which he had found on a nearby beach, and characteristically produced a report listing several explanations for its puzzling presence there.

Marion Campbell's keen observation and practical experience were combined with an imagination which owed much to the oral tradition of Argyll. An overwhelming desire to understand the way in which former generations had lived in her own part of the world led to research of national importance. Her humanity and humour made her widely loved and respected among the people of Argyll in her own day.

Ian Fisher