



# CLAN LAMONT SOCIETY of NORTH AMERICA



## Chief and Chieftains

By Sir Crispin Agnew of Lochnaw Bt  
Unicorn Pusuvant of Arms

**Chiefs, Chieftains, High Chiefs, Branch Chiefs, Captains, Barons, Lords and Lairds** are terminology connected with clans, which lead to considerable confusion, when discussing clan matters, particularly because the usage, even in reputable publications, is often applied loosely.

The principal division is between chiefs and chieftains. A chief is properly described as "Chief of the Name and Arms." He is head of the whole name in Scotland, whether a Highland clan or a Lowland family. The description is Norman-French in origin and was introduced into Scotland to describe the Scottish-Norman families. By the time of Sir George Mackenzie, King's Advocate, during the reign of Charles II, the designation was applied to any person entitled to bear the plain undifferenced arms of his name, demonstrative of his chiefship of the name. The description "Chief of the Clan" is sometimes used although this is more properly a social description rather than a legal designation.

In early times, the Highland clan leaders were described as "Captains" of their clans but this description has officially been superseded by the description "Chief of the Name and Arms," although certain clan chiefs are socially and formally described as the Captain of the Clan, e.g. the Captain of Clan Chattan. The chief of the name and arms, whether Highland or Lowland is entitled to wear three eagle's feathers in his bonnet badge.

A "Chieftain" is the head of a considerable branch of the name and was frequently called "Chieftane of the Cuntre." A chief will have one or more chieftains under his command although in the organization and leadership of their branch they will have considerable independence. The chief's eldest son or heir presumptive is also considered to be a chieftain and in the major clans,

all the chiefs' sons may be considered to be chieftains. A chieftain of a clan is entitled to wear two eagle's feathers in his bonnet badge.

Where a branch of a clan is sufficiently important in its own right or the branches of a clan are sufficiently separated territorially, so that each part is almost independent, the chieftain of the branch of the clan may acquire the status of a Branch Chief. A branch chief is an independent chief of his own branch of the clan, although he is under the overall chiefship of the chief of the Name and Arms of the Clan. A chief can be distinguished from a branch chief by his designation, because the chief is described simply as being of his name, whereas the branch chief's name is always qualified by a territorial designation. Thus, Lady Saltoun is Chief of the Name and Arms of Fraser, while Lord Lovat, a branch chief, is called Chief of the Name and Arms of Fraser of Lovat, the "of Lovat" being the factor which distinguishes him from the chief of the whole name. Similarly, the Maclaines of Lochbuie are branch chiefs of the Clan Maclean and are designated "Chief of the Name and Arms of Maclean of Lochbuie," the "of Lochbuie" being the designator of their branch chiefship. Branch chiefs are entitled to wear three eagle's feathers in their bonnet badge.

Having said that the head of a whole name is described as "Chief," the law does recognize that there are different levels of chiefship to reflect the relative importance of the different names or clans in Scotland.

### High Chiefs

Certain clans are so large and important that their chief is considered a High Chief of the whole name. The High Chiefs: Chieftains command such large and independent followings that they are in their own right officially

recognized as chiefs (not branch chiefs) in their own right and have their own chieftains under their command. Thus, Lord MacDonal is High Chief of Clan Donald, with Clanranald, Glengarry and Sleat, etc. as his chiefs. The Captain of Clan Chattan has The MacKintosh, Cluny-Macpherson, Farquharson of Invercauld, etc. as his chiefs. The High Chiefship of the Stewarts (possibly The Earl of Galloway) is dormant, although the Marquess of Bute, Earl of Moray and Stewart of Appin are recognized as chiefs of their own clans .

### Heraldic rights

Chiefs entitled to Supporters. The grant of supporters to a chief was indicative of the fact that he was of sufficient standing with a large following, to warrant the grant of this exclusive heraldic right. Certain chiefs from the peerage and baronial class were entitled to supporters as a right and include chiefs such as The Duke of Argyll, the Earl of Rothes, Colquhoun of Luss or Burnett of Leys. Certain other chiefs, had become sufficiently important in their own right to warrant the grant of supporters to them at some stage. Such clans include the Lamonts, MacGregors, the Elliots and the Macneils.

**Chiefs** entitled to Exterior Ornaments. Supporters are animals or humans who stand on either side of the shield. Certain chiefs of old houses, whose name and following were never sufficiently important to warrant supporters have sometimes been allowed exterior ornaments to their shields to indicate that they are more important than the lowest rank of chief. Exterior ornaments, which are placed either side of the shield, are inanimate objects like candles or trees. Chiefs in this category include The McBain of McBain and the Leask of that ilk.

**Chiefs.** There are numerous tenants-in-chief of the Crown who are chief of their name and arms but never had a sufficient following to warrant the grant of supporters. These families tended to rally to the standard of the local magnet with a small following and would fight under his banner. Examples include such families as the Moffats of that Ilk, the Arnotts of that Ilk and the Antrobus of that Ilk.

There are certain names in Scotland which cause confusion, because, although they appear to be important independent Scottish name groups, often with their own tartan, the name as such has never had a chief in its own right. The reason for this is that those families were in the nature of a sept or branch of the clan but they had their own independent surname. Examples of such names include the MacRaes, formerly "Mackenzies Shirt of Mail" who are still not recognized as an independent clan because they have all along attached themselves to the Mackenzies as their chief. It is possible that in time they will organize themselves sufficiently to be

recognized as a newly emergent independent clan.

Where a chiefship is dormant and there is a possibility that the chiefly line will be discovered with due research, the clan may approach the Lord Lyon to seek the interim appointment of a suitable person as the Commander of the Clan. A Commander ranks with but after the Chiefs of the Clans but his appointment depends on a commission from the Lord Lyon and lasts for his life or until such time as a chief is discovered. Recent examples of the appointment of a Commander by the Lord Lyon include Iain Gunn of Banniskirk to be Commander of the Clan Gunn and the appointment of a Commander to the Clan McPhee.

The title Baron sometimes causes confusion in Scotland by being confused with the peerage dignities. While in England the junior rank of the peerage is described as Baron, in Scotland the correct designation is Lord of Parliament. The next rank below the peerage in Scotland is the baronage who were the feudal tenants in-chief of the Crown who had a hereditary jurisdiction which included the power of

"pit and gallows" i.e. imprisonment and death. Basically, a baron was the Crown's hereditary local judge. A baron has the description of being the "Baron of X" attached to his name although he does not necessarily have a title to his name. Thus, Richard Carmichael of that Ilk is Baron of Carmichael and note the use of the word "of," because it is incorrect to describe him as "Baron Carmichael."

Originally the word laird was a corruption of Lord but nowadays the title denominates a person owning landed estate feudally direct from the Crown. It is a term of affection applied to the local land owner by his tenants who will describe him as "the Laird"

Although the titles Chief and Chieftain are used loosely, it is important to distinguish the different gradations from the precise language which is used in the Lyon Court Matriculations issued to confirm their position as Chief, Branch Chief or Chieftain in their respective clans and families .

Reprinted from The Highlander May 1985

