



The Chieftainship of the House of Douglas

For over 700 Years, since the crowning of Robert Bruce, the Douglas Family has consistently been the most prominent in Scotland. At different times, they have made Kings and broken them, been appointed Regents of Scotland, repeatedly led their armed forces, married into the Royal family, been fabulously wealthy and have come close to taking the Crown for themselves. No other family, possibly excluding the Royal Stewarts themselves, come close. It is typical that at the time of the most important decision the country had to make since Bannockburn (that of the Union of the Parliaments), each side was led by a Duke James Douglas (respectively Dukes of Queensberry and Hamilton). At one time, Lady Margaret Douglas, the only child of the Chief of Douglas – the Earl of Angus, was first in line to the throne of England, not Scotland! Her grandson, James VI and 1st achieved both! As recently as 1964 Lord Douglas of Douglas (Sir Alec Douglas Home) was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Dukes are the highest rank in the Aristocracy, during one period, three members of the Douglas family held Dukedoms simultaneously, (Douglas, Queensberry and Hamilton).

Many of their lands, Castles, Palaces and Great Houses, some originally awarded in the 14th Century, still remain with one branch or another of the family. The biggest Douglas concentration of wealth lies with the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry, who is one of the wealthiest aristocrats and landowners in Britain and probably Europe. The Duke of Douglas carried the crown at the closing of the Scottish Parliament in 1707 and Angus Douglas-Hamilton, Marquess of Douglas and Duke of Hamilton carried it, at its reopening in 1999.

Who then is Chief of the House of Douglas and where is its seat?

Tragically we have neither!

In Scotland, no individual can be Clan Chief (or Chief of the House in Lowland Scotland) of more than one family at a time. As such, double or triple barrelled surnames are not permitted.

The leading contender is Alexander Douglas-Hamilton, current Marquess of Douglas, but he is also the Duke of Hamilton and Premier Peer of Scotland. He is heir male of the House of Douglas. He is not heir male of The House of Hamilton, although he its Duke. The actual heir male of Hamilton is also a Duke (The Duke of Abercorn). This came about in the 17th Century, when William Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, son of the Marquess of Douglas, married Anne, Duchess of Hamilton in her own right. All subsequent Dukes of Hamilton have been Douglasses, not Hamiltons. When the first and

only Duke of Douglas died without an heir, all his titles (but not the lands) passed to the Duke of Hamilton as heir male. The lands, (after the notorious court case – The Douglas Cause), passed eventually to the Douglas-Home family.

However, unless he (or one of his sons) is willing to change his surname to Douglas, instead of Douglas-Hamilton, they cannot be appointed Chief of the House. The late Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry (also a Douglas Contender) did precisely that for himself and his son, changing his surname to Scott, so that he could become Chief of the House of Scott. Previously their family name was Montagu-Douglas-Scott. (However they are not Douglases, Montagus or Scotts but Stuarts, descendants of the Duke of Monmouth, illegitimate son of Charles II, who had married the Countess of Buccleuch in her own right). Incidentally, with the exception of the Earls of Morton, all contenders and major branches of the Douglas family are descended from bastards! It shows the power of the Douglas family, that illegitimate members were allowed to become Chief of the House (which was very unusual in Medieval Scotland).

The second, generally accepted principal contender is David, 15th Earl of Home. He is Baron Douglas of Douglas, which is the type of title usually given to the Clan Chief or Chief of House. He owns Douglas and Angus Estates, which includes Douglas Castle and the Church. His family, notwithstanding the fact that they demolished Douglas Castle in the 1930's, have been good custodians of the name. He is the heir of Douglas on the female side, but, depending on your point of view about The Douglas Cause Court Case, probably not even that. The former Prime Minister - Sir Alex Douglas-Home, as he was then, showed my wife and myself round the family seat - The Hirsell. He paused in front of the portrait of Archibald Steuart-Douglas, the winner of the Court Case and said "looks French to me" which was what the whole case had been about! In any event, unless he, or his son, give up the Home of the surname, they cannot become Chief.

The third contender is the Marquess of Queensberry. Note he is the Marquess but not the Duke. That title and most of the lands went to the Scotts through the female line. The Marquess of Queensberry's direct ancestors include the boxing Marquess and his son Lord Alfred Douglas, famous from the Oscar Wilde trial. He is genuinely a Douglas in the male line, albeit like most of the others, descended from a bastard, (the illegitimate son of the 2nd Earl of Douglas - the hero of Otterburn). Sadly, none of the descendants of the powerful Black Douglas family survive, with the possible exception of this branch. (The split into Red or Black Douglasas occurred after the 2nd Earl died, victorious at Otterburn). The House of Angus, (Red Douglases) who sided with the Crown in the struggle for power after the Douglas murders by King James II, were awarded the Chieftanship of the House after the Crown was victorious and the Black Douglases were wiped out. Descendants of the Red Douglas eventually became Marquesses and then Duke of Douglas and finally Dukes of Hamilton. The Marquess does have a single surname – Douglas, but not the lands, seats or wealth of the other contenders. As a direct descendant of the 2nd Earl of Douglas who was the great nephew of the founder of the real power of the family – the Good Sir James, the Chieftanship could possibly be awarded to him, even although he represents a junior branch of the family.

It is sad that the finest of the "lived in" Douglas Castles – Drumlanrig, went with the Dukedom to the Scott's and not to the Marquess who is a Douglas.

We now come to the fourth Contender, that of the Earl of Morton (Dalmahoy, Aberdour and formerly Dalkeith). They are in an unusual position. They have a single surname – Douglas and are thus eligible. They hold one of the oldest Earldom's in Scotland. In William Douglas, the founder of their fortunes, they had had a very important freedom fighter for Scotland after the Bruce Dynasty nearly lost the Crown to the “English supported” Balliol family, after Robert the Bruce's death.

Although they were once intimately connected to the Angus Red Douglasses, (their most famous Earl was the Regent Morton in Mary Queen of Scots time), this was however by marriage, the Regent being the Douglas nephew of the Douglas Chief - the Earl of Angus. The previously mentioned William, known to history as the Flower of Chivalry, (although latterly he had a rather tarnished reputation) was actually killed by his own godson – the 1st Earl of Douglas!

The Morton Earls have held important offices at different periods and for many years owned the Orkney and Shetland Islands. They are however, not descended from either the Good Sir James or his nephew the 1st Earl of Douglas, as are all the other contenders. The extraordinary power, wealth and above all prestige of the Douglas family through the ages (at one time a Douglas marriage outranked a Royal Stewart marriage), all stemmed from these two individuals and their legitimate and sometimes illegitimate heirs! At the height of their power, the Black Douglasses had been awarded the Dukedom of Touraine, which was normally reserved for French Royal Princes! The Morton Douglas line broke off from the main line before the time of the Good Sir James or his father.

There is one last contender that I personally think “ticks all the boxes”. James Douglas-Hamilton, Lord Selkirk of Douglas, was for a brief moment, Earl of Selkirk before, for political reasons, he renounced the title. His son however will inherit it.

It has previously been noted that the Douglas “takeover” of their traditional enemy's (Hamilton) titles culminating in the Dukedom of Hamilton, came through the marriage of the Earl of Selkirk with the Duchess of Hamilton. The Earldom of Selkirk is unique in that, if the direct heirs die out, it reverts to the second son of the Duke of Hamilton (as Lord Selkirk was). Lord Selkirk had an illustrious career as a British and Scottish politician. It would appear appropriate to me that as the Douglas connection came with the Earl of Selkirk it should return with it! I approached Lord Selkirk regarding this proposal that he should “throw his hat in the ring” for the Douglas Chieftenship, but he declined. He had had experience previously in the Courts of disputed titles, (that of his own, the Earldom of Selkirk) and was not anxious to repeat the process!

Unless one of the five contenders takes the initiative, which would possibly force some of the others to defend their positions, it would appear, sadly, that nothing is likely to change soon, and we, the most important historic family in Scotland are left without a Chief!

Norman F Douglas

The clan does not have a chief recognised by the Lyon Court, so therefore it is now considered an armigerous clan.

Armigerous clan

There is a view that an armigerous clan is a Scottish clan, family or name which is registered with the Court of the Lord Lyon and once had a chief who bore undifferenced arms, but does not have a chief currently recognized as such by Lyon Court. Before 1745 all chiefs had arms; however, not all of these are recorded in the Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland, which was only established in 1672.

However in Scottish heraldry only chiefs or heads of clans, families, or names bear undifferenced arms. A clan is considered a "noble incorporation" because a clan chief is a title of honour in Scotland and the chief confers his or her noble status onto the clan. Clans which do not have such chiefs are not recognised as noble communities and have no legal standing.

The idea of an armigerous clan is questionable under Scottish law. In Lord Lyon's view 'There is a widespread misconception that a family or a clan can have a family or clan Coat of Arms. Many heraldic and clan web sites and other media suggest that a person has the right to use the family or clan Arms. This is completely incorrect...What is permitted is for a member of a clan to use the clan crest. Usually what is referred to as the clan Coat of Arms is in fact the personal Arms of the chief of the clan which can only be used by the chief.' and "there is no such thing as a clan coat of arms" Given Lord Lyon's statements it is logically impossible for a clan to be armigerous.