

# MOUNTAIN ECHO ONLINE

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McCuiston, McCuiston,  
and other related names*

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*This photo shows Mark McCuiston, at right, and myself at Paisley Abbey, in 2006. We were accompanied by Mark's wife, Lynn, my wife, Beth, and Betty Mathews, a McCuiston descendant. This was just one of many stops on our whirlwind tour of Scotland. Paisley Abbey played a significant role in our family history as it appears from what little evidence there is that Hugh of Sleat, the progenitor of our name, passed away at Paisley Abbey in 1498. There was a major fire at the abbey in 1498, as well as a plague throughout Scotland. Either of these, or perhaps simply old age, could have been responsible for Hugh's death. The only clue we have is that an old book on the Stewart dynasty stated that "the old chief of Clan Donald" died at the abbey in 1498. Hugh's brother, John, last Lord of the Isles, is buried at the abbey but he died in Dundee, Scotland, a few years further down the road. Sometimes it is mistakenly said that John died in 1498, but there are legal documents with his signature, and records of his death, that prove otherwise. Also, John was never considered "chief" of Clan Donald. Rather, he was Lord of the Isles. Hugh is the first to truly be considered a "chief" of Clan Donald, and so, since we know he died in 1498, it must be Hugh that is being spoken of as "the old chief of Clan Donald" who died at the abbey in that year.*

*The following is an article that I have submitted to "Highlander" magazine. Consider this a sneak preview, for our family only -*

Late in the year 1559 Presbyterian followers of John Knox began appropriating various Catholic/Jacobite strongholds in Scotland. In a letter to William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State, it was revealed that "the Lords had suppressed the Abbeys of Paisley, Kilwinning, and Dunfermling, and burned all the images, idols, and popish stuff."

One relic, however, was spirited out of Paisley Abbey by Jacobite sympathizers and made its way safely into the hands of William Sinclair, of Rosslyn Chapel. Sir William had been appointed Lord Justice General of Scotland by Queen Mary, this very same year, and was a man of great literary and antiquarian tastes. The treasure he received is known as the *Black Book of Paisley*.

Scottish antiquarian, Father Richard Hay (1661 - c.1736), tells us that Sinclair had "gathered a great many manuscripts which had been taken, by the rabble, out of our Monasteries in the time of the

Reformation.” Scottish historian Thomas Dempster (1579 - 1625) writes that the Paisley book was, “snatched as a Palladium from the Knoxian flames.”

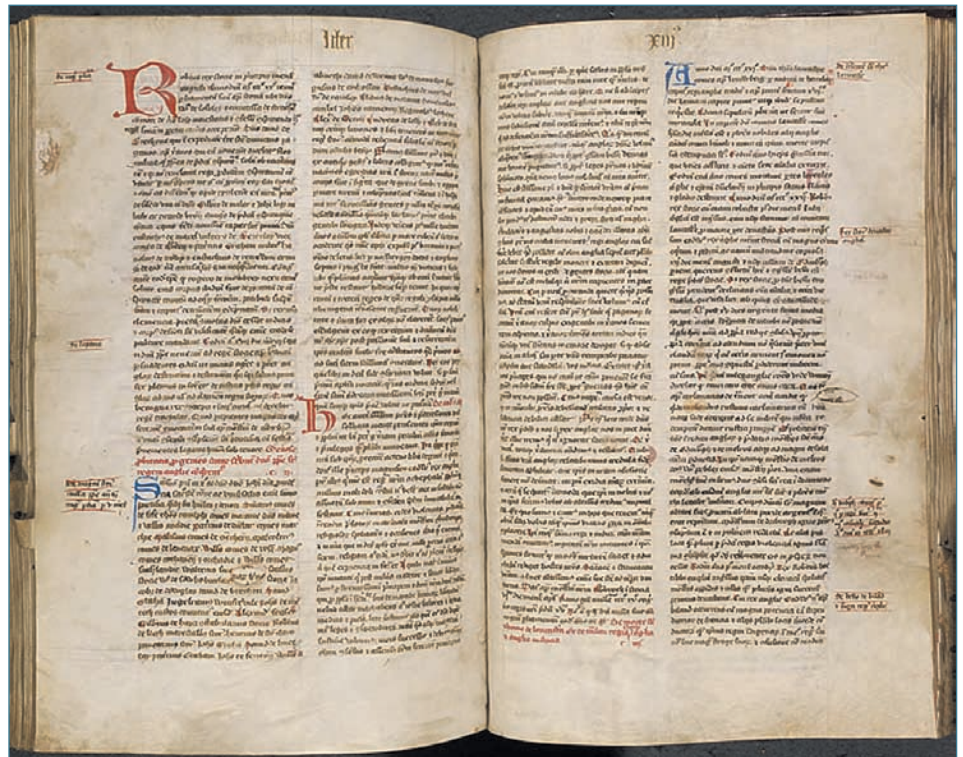
What could be the importance of this book that it so narrowly survived this and other close calls during its over five hundred years of existence, and what is the significance of Paisley Abbey?

Throughout history, certain objects develop mysterious legends, legends that sometimes last for centuries - legends like the Holy Grail or the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Black Book of Paisley* is one such object.

Currently in the hands of the British Library, the book belies its name as it was rebound many years ago in the color red. Emblazoned on the front cover are the words “SCOTI CHRONICON PER JOHAN DE FORDUN ET WALTER BOWER. BLACK BOOK OF PAISLEY.” Translated, this reads “Scotland Chronicles by John of Fordun and Walter Bower. Black Book of Paisley.”

Today, the *Scotichronicon* is considered a compilation of the historical writings of John Fordun and Walter Bower (sometimes given as Bowmaker). While the combined writings of these two men are typically considered the “*Scotichronicon* proper”, abridgments made in successive years are sometimes collectively considered as part of the greater *Scotichronicon* - the most important medieval account of Scottish history.

By the time Fordun began his project, many of Scotland’s chronicles had been destroyed due to English invasions. In order to rebuild this history, Fordun visited monasteries throughout Great



*This is the oldest known transcription of the Declaration of Arbroath, the Scottish declaration of independence. It appears in an ancient book called the Black Book of Paisley, the original declaration having been a letter sent to the pope in Rome. This transcription was made at Paisley Abbey during the very years between the time that Hugh of Sleat died there, and his brother John, was buried there.*

Britain and Ireland to recreate his country’s early records, collecting this information during the later half of the 14th century.

Fordun also relied on two distinguished men for assistance. One was John Barbour who wrote the 13,000 line epic poem “The Bruce”. Barbour’s work, while containing some poetic license, did recount much of the missing history of Scotland, especially that which surrounded Robert the Bruce. Barbour studied at Oxford and was Archdeacon of Aberdeen during the same period that Fordun was a priest and chaplain there. The other historian aiding Fordun was Walter Wadlow, Bishop of Glasgow, a legate appointed by the pope, and the Scottish ambassador to England appointed by the king. Wadlow provided Fordun with a detailed genealogy of Scottish royalty, as well as other information.

Fordun probably completed his work by 1387. Both he and Wadlow are said to have died in that year, although there is some evidence that Fordun was alive as late as 1395. In his portion of the *Scotichronicon*, Fordun carried the line of Scottish royalty down to the death of David I, in 1153.

About 1441, Walter Bower, at the urging of Sir David Stewart of Rosyth, began transcribing Fordun’s five books of Scottish history and added eleven more for a total of sixteen books that make up the original *Scotichronicon*. These sixteen “books” were typically reproduced in a single large volume, as in the case with the *Black Book of Paisley* - the first-known transcription of the original *Scotichronicon*.

Bower was born in 1385, just barely within the lifetime of Fordun. He became Abbot of Inchcolm and

also tax collector under James I. Fordun completed his portion of the *Scotichronicon* by 1447, but perhaps as late as 1449, carrying the Scottish royal house down to James II.

The *Scotichronicon* proper was then, over the next several years, transcribed into a small number of manuscripts, the oldest or earliest being the Paisley book dating from about 1451 to 1452. While the monks at Paisley Abbey were given the honor of using the actual writings of Fordun and Bower to create their volume, at least some other versions to follow were copied from the Paisley book.

Other known versions of the *Scotichronicon* are the Brechin Castle manuscript of 1480, the Schevez manuscript from 1484, the Edinburgh College manuscript from 1510, and the Donibristle manuscript, also from about 1510. Each of these, in some cases, present the same information but in varying order, or may have additional abridgments made.

The original Paisley book was transcribed a second time in 1500, and abridged in 1501. This work, so abridged, was then known as the *Niger Liber Pastleti*, and it is the identical volume now in the British Library, known as the *Black Book of Paisley*. What became of the original transcription is unknown.

Approximately two-hundred and seventy-one pages in length, the surviving Paisley volume is handwritten, for the most part in Latin, by a fifteenth-century hand, and features black text with the paragraphs beginning with a drop cap, alternating between blue type and red type.

The Schevez manuscript is also in the hands of the British Library and is often referred to as the Harleian manuscript. The Edinburgh College



*We've known for some time that the man we are named for, Hugh of Sleat, or Uisdean Macdonald, is buried at a place called Sand, on the island of North Uist, near the Isle of Skye. Tim McCuiston sent me a map of a place on North Uist called Clachan Shannda. Clachan means "a village with a church." Shannda is the same word as sand. I did a Google image search and came up with this picture named "Clachan Shannda cemetery on North Uist". The description on the website names it "Clachan Sand cemetery". Clachan Shannda basically translates as "a small village and church called Sand." After years of looking for this burial site I believe we have found the actual cemetery where Hugh of Sleat is buried! Also significant is that fact that this area was under the control of the Harris family, and many, if not most members of this family are descendants of Hugh through his third son, Donald Hearrach, or Donald Harris. Many Harris men matched us in the DNA project.*

manuscript is thought to have been the volume otherwise known as the *Book of Scone*. Another version, known as the *Book of Cupar*, was a condensed abridgment also created by Walter Bower, during the last two years of his life, and currently preserved by the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, Scotland. Another is the *Book of Perth*, likely an abridgment created by Patrick Russell, a monk from the Carthusian Order, of Perth. It is also held by the Advocates' Library, along with an abridgment by an unknown writer. A final copy is held in the library of Corpus Christi College, in Cambridge, England.

Many of these later copies - the *Book of Cupar*, *Book of Scone* and *Book of Perth* - were nearly exact copies of earlier works, while the Brechin Castle, Schevez, and Donibristle manuscripts varied

slightly in format compared to the *Black Book of Paisley*. Still, all present a substantial amount, if not all of the *Scotichronicon* text.

Many ancient authors, including Sir George Mackenzie, Patrick Fraser Tytler, and David Murray, contend that the book of Paisley is the original in this type of reproduction of the *Scotichronicon*. This is proven, to some degree, in that the majority of the other books carry the succession of the royal house of Scotland, and of the Roman popes, beyond the Paisley book, indicating later creation dates. Also, there are mentions of specific plagues in Scotland that help establish the dating of this book.

David Murray published an extensive account of the Paisley book in 1885. Earlier in that century, Patrick Tytler produced his *History of Scotland*, and several articles

for "Blackwood's Magazine", in which he mentions the same book. George Mackenzie was best known for his *Defense of the Royal Line of Scotland*, written in 1685 and *The Antiquity of the Royal Line of Scotland Further Defended*, from 1686, in which he also mentions the black book.

There is little argument that the Paisley manuscript is the earliest transcription of the *Scotichronicon*, however it was not without its controversy in other areas. The black book contains one of the earliest reproductions of the Declaration of Arbroath - the Scottish declaration of independence. It also contains the lineage of the royal house and has been drawn into the arguments over the veracity of that genealogy. Fordun repeated what he had heard, concerning the history of the Scottish throne, from Bishop Wadlow of Glasgow. Bower built on that lineage. Later, the line of descent repeated in the *Black Book* - and the very existence of the book, itself - came under intense scrutiny.

In addition to the genealogy of Scotland's early kings, and the reproduction of the Arbroath declaration, the work also includes a list of early Scottish historians and many other early records, including virtually all the writings of John Fordun. Bower attempted to delineate between Fordun's writings and his own, with various notes, although there are some areas where the authorship is in question. In addition, there are lists entitled "Fratres Jacobite", "Comitatus Scocie", and "Ducatus Scocie" - the first, a list of Jacobite brethren or religious leaders, the second, a list of military leaders, and the third, a list of government leaders.

The Paisley Manuscript also contains prophecies, records of legal

cases, and stories of battles such as the Battle of Homildon Hill. There are reproductions of older writings like Prester John's famous letter to the Greek emperor. There are many other records, along with a few notes added by later owners of the *Black Book of Paisley*, including the Sinclair family.

But why should Paisley Abbey be given such an honor to be the home of the first transcription of this valuable record of Scottish history?

Paisley Abbey was created in 1163 when Walter Fitzalan, the High Steward of Scotland, signed a charter for the founding of a Cluniac monastery on land he owned in Renfrewshire, approximately seven miles from Glasgow. Thirteen monks set up the priory on the site of an old Celtic church. The abbey charter was signed by several knights who families came to Scotland with William the Conqueror. Many a Scottish name has links back to the charter of Paisley Abbey, during a time when surnames were first beginning to be used in Scotland.

The Glasgow Airport is located very nearby, just to the east of Paisley, and it was here, at the airport's current location, that Somerled, one of the great Gaelic heroes, was killed in battle, in 1164. His family, which became Clan Donald, also joined in issuing charters to the abbey in repayment for the burial of Somerled by the monks of Paisley. Somerled is said to be buried at Saddell Abbey near the Mull of Kintyre. The Macdonald family supported Paisley Abbey for centuries to come and some of its old chiefs retired there, peacefully, as monks, escaping the cold of the north and the blood of the battlefields.

Hugh of Sleat, chief of Clan Donald North, died at the abbey, in 1498, although he was buried on the

island of North Uist. This was the same year that a major fire destroyed the main buildings of Paisley Abbey, which were later rebuilt. Hugh's brother, John, last Lord of the Isles, died a few years later at Dundee and his body was brought to the abbey for burial.

From the beginning of Clan Donald and the death of Somerled, in 1164, until the end of the Lord of the Isles dynasty and the death of Hugh and John Macdonald (three and one half centuries later), Clan Donald was intimately and financially involved with the abbey, despite it being in the possession of other families.

Paisley Abbey was first under the control of the Stewart family, and later, of the Hamilton family. It has played a very substantial role in Scottish history. The sixth High Steward, Walter, married Marjory Bruce, the daughter of the famous Scottish king Robert the Bruce, in 1315. In the following year, Marjory died at the abbey following a tragic riding accident nearby, but the baby in her womb was saved and he became King Robert II of Scotland, the very first of the Stewart monarchs. For that reason, the abbey claims to be the "cradle of the Royal House of Stewart." The Paisley book speaks extensively of the marriage of Robert II to Elizabeth More. Robert II is often said to be buried at Paisley Abbey but was actually interred at Scone. However, Robert III was buried at the abbey.

Perhaps because of its significance to Scottish history and to the royal family, Paisley Abbey was chosen as the site for the first transcription of the *Scotichronicon*. The current Paisley cathedral is a replacement and/or addition to earlier buildings, which were burned or had deteriorated. It was the attack

on the abbey by adherents of John Knox that led to the *Black Book of Paisley* being spirited out of the abbey and, in part, to it becoming the legend that it has.

In a few ancient manuscripts there are mentions of the Black Book of Paisley being in the hands of William Sinclair. In the year of Sinclair's passing, 1574, the Paisley book became the subject of a legal case between Claud Hamilton, the nephew of John Hamilton, the last abbot of Paisley, and Lord Semphill.

Semphill had taken over Paisley Abbey after Claud's estates were forfeited due to his support of Mary, Queen of Scots. In 1573, it was declared by Parliament that Claud should be reinstated in the abbey and its land holdings. However, Semphill refused to accept the judgment and was forced to yield only after the abbey was besieged by the Earl of Argyle. Hamilton then presented his legal case, stating that Semphill still had in his hands the seal of the abbey and the "buke callit the blak buik of Paisley", declining to return them to Hamilton.

There is some speculation that what Hamilton really wanted were rental and register records, rather than the rare historical volume. Regardless, after he abdicated his position at Paisley, Sir James Semphill, in welcoming King James back to his native soil, after a fourteen year absence, stated, "I swear by the *Black Book of Paisley* your Majesty is most dearlie welcome." How odd that he chose this book rather than the Bible, unless it was held in great esteem by both Semphill and the king.

The Archbishop of Spotswood was married to William Sinclair's daughter. The Archbishop, in preparing to write his book, *History*

*of the Church of Scotland*, wrote his father-in-law asking permission to use the Paisley manuscript. The Archbishop apparently received the book "from Holyrood" - the Scottish royal palace - possibly from Lord Whitehall, Lord of Session.

That Spotswood had the book when writing his history of the church is not argued. Father Richard Hay writes that he found the book in the catalogue of Spotswood's library after he died. Others, including Spotswood's grandson, agree. The book may have then been taken back to the abbey at Holyrood, and escaped destruction once again, when that structure was burned November 13, 1650.

At some point the *Black Book of Paisley* came into the possession of General Lambert who took it to England and presented it to Lord Fairfax, the Parliamentary General. Though a Presbyterian, Fairfax was an antiquarian, and a lover and

collector of curious manuscripts. Fairfax also received, about this same time, a copy of Wynton's Chronicles, which had also been a part of Sinclair's library.

Fairfax either gave the *Black Book of Paisley* to Charles II, or sold it to him for 100 British pounds as some reports indicate. Charles added it to the Royal Library at St. James'. It was then that the book became the subject of a violent literary controversy involving the genealogy of the Scottish kings.

While in the possession of Charles II, the *Black Book* was recovered in its present red morocco binding. The manuscript, along with Charles' vast collection, was given to the British Museum, by King George II, in 1759.

Today, this magnificent old tome, the *Black Book of Paisley*, has found a resting place at the British Library, to await its next great adventure.

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*I have visited the magnificent Paisley Abbey three times - in 1999, 2000, and again in 2006. I ate my first piece of haggis in its shadows one evening, on my first visit, and stood in the pulpit on my last. There are a number of tombs within the building and a small graveyard outside. In one place or the other are the remains of John, Last Lord of the Isles, brother to our Hugh of Sleat. Also, somewhere on these grounds Hugh passed away although his body was taken back to the Isles for burial in his homeland.*