

ALLAN MASSIE

Over the Sea to Skye

'Pretty Young Rebel': The Life of Flora Macdonald

By Flora Fraser

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There are many people remembered, indeed famous, because of a single episode in their lives. One such was Flora Macdonald. In truth, her entire life story is interesting, as Flora Fraser shows in this thoroughly researched biography, but her life would hardly be remembered if it weren't for what happened in the last nine or ten days of June 1746, when she was perhaps twenty-four.

In the ten weeks following his defeat at Culloden, which had extinguished the 1745 Jacobite Rising, Prince Charles Edward Stuart (better known as the Young Pretender) had been in hiding in the Highlands, moved by supporters from place to place. There was a reward of £30,000 for his capture. By June, he was in the Western Isles – Uist and Benbecula – hoping to find a French ship. There were government troops there in numbers. The net seemed to be closing. Perhaps he should be moved to Skye. But how? Flora's stepfather, Hugh Macdonald of Armadale, proposed a daring plan. If she could obtain a passport permitting her to cross to Skye, the prince might travel with her, disguised as an Irish maid-servant. Flora, a prudent young woman, was at first hesitant. She doubted it could be done and the risk was great. But she was persuaded that no other plan had a chance of success. Fraser suggests that her father feared things would go ill for the family if the prince was captured on Macdonald land. There may have been another reason. One of Flora's cousins, Neil MacEachen, was already with the prince.

The young man Flora met was far from looking like the elegant prince who now features on countless shortbread tins. He was 'black weather-beaten', dressed as a rough Highlander and suffering from midges and the itch. He greeted her in courtly style but there would be no romance between them. Flora then set off to obtain passports for herself, her cousin Neil and her Irish maid, Betty Burke.

On her return, she and the other women sewed clothes for the lanky maid. Flora refused to let Charles Edward keep his pistols under his skirts – though, as the prince observed, any search of the maid's undergarments would have revealed something more remarkable than the guns.

There were government troops and spies all around them, but the deception worked: Betty Burke escaped suspicion, the crossing to Skye was safely made and the prince, with Neil still at hand, was entrusted to other friends. On bidding farewell to Flora, he said he hoped to see her at St James's Palace. But they would never meet again.

Word of Flora's activities could not be kept secret, and she was arrested while the prince was still sailing to France. She was taken by ship to London and treated with sympathy by the captain. It was her good fortune that what was known of the story had made her a celebrity. The government's response to the rising had been harsh, even savage: execution, imprisonment and exile to the American and West Indian colonies as 'indentured labourers' (in effect slaves) were the sentences meted out to those involved. Flora, however, was subjected only to house arrest, eventually in the home of a rich peeress with Jacobite sympathies, Lady Primrose. Indeed, she herself was able to receive admiring guests.

Flora had never been an active Jacobite. Nor indeed had her stepfather or the chief of the Clanranald Macdonalds. No doubt they were sympathetic to Jacobitism, but, like many Highland gentlemen, they tempered their sympathy with prudence. English Jacobites, of whom there were a good many, had been even more careful not to commit themselves to the cause. Dinner table talks, toasts and songs were one thing, as readers of Fielding's *Tom Jones* will remember; action was another. (Years later, Dr Johnson, a Tory and ideologically a Jacobite, said that

if England were fairly polled, the ruling family would be sent back to Hanover, but nobody would lift a finger to bring this about.) Nevertheless, despite the promised reward for his capture, no one could be found to betray the prince.

After her release, Flora returned to Scotland and married a cousin, Allan Macdonald, who was seeking to make a living as a farmer. She led a modest life, but as her children grew up, she sensibly made use of her celebrity to find good positions for her sons – one, for instance, was employed by the East India Company. However, her husband, though amiable, was no businessman and ran into debt. He eventually sold up and they emigrated to the Carolinas, where he was able to buy land. The timing of the relocation, a year before the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, was unfortunate. Allan and Flora, like many other Scots with Jacobite sympathies in the Carolinas, remained loyal to the crown, Allan raising a loyalist company. Perhaps the experiences of 1745 led them to suppose that the American rebels would lose. Before long, they were on the move again, seeking refuge in Canada. The journey was difficult for Flora, now in her mid-fifties and in poor health, and they soon returned to Scotland. Johnson and Boswell visited them on their tour of the Hebrides, and when Johnson published an account of his travels (a book in which his own Jacobite sentiments were evident) her celebrity was renewed. In old age (and a year after the death in Rome of Charles Edward), Flora was granted a pension by the British crown. Jacobitism was dead except as a sentiment and the Prince of Wales (later King George IV), who arranged the pension, was in a position to indulge his sentimental side.

Fraser tells the story of Flora Macdonald's life very well, with sympathy, respect and understanding. One suspects that in the week that secured lasting fame for Flora, she was motivated more by a sense of responsibility for the prince's safety than by any personal feeling for him. Others took greater risks to guard him in the months after the Battle of Culloden, but it is Flora's role in his escape that is most famous.