The Highland Heroine and the Prince

A biographer sorts fact from fiction in telling the story of Flora Macdonald, who helped rescue a Stuart royal.

By JULIE FLAVELL

LAST YEAR MARKED The 300th anniversary of the birth of Flora Macdonald, the highland heroine who in 1746 helped Prince Charles Edward Stuart ("Bonnie Prince Charlie") to escape British forces in an open boat "over the sea to Skye," following the tragic defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden, Scotland — and the end of the exiled House of Stuarts' efforts to restore the family to the British throne.

For more than two and a half centuries Flora's story has captured the popular imagination in novels, poems, songs and films, much of the retelling distorted to satisfy the public's appetite for romance. In the process the real Flora Macdonald has been buried under myths and half-truths that reflect the enduring trope of a tender-hearted young woman who shows mettle in the face of danger. In "Flora Macdonald: 'Pretty Young Rebel': Her Life and Story," her well-researched and enthusiastic biography, Flora Fraser recounts Macdonald's life based on facts culled from published and archival sources on both sides of the Atlantic.

FLORA MACDONALD
"Pretty Young Rebel": Her Life and Story
By Flora Fraser
Illustrated. 264 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $30.

The book opens in the Western Isles of Scotland in the summer of 1746, where the fugitive Prince Charles had been evading British government troops since late April. In mid-June he was presented with a daring plan: He would be smuggled off the islands to the Isle of Skye disguised as a maidservant. His protector would be a young woman, Flora Macdonald, whose stepfather, Hugh, probably planned the escape, and certainly suggested it to the prince. Hugh Macdonald was no Jacobite — he was a captain of a pro-British government militia — yet he called himself a "friend in his heart" to Prince Charles. Like many Scotsmen, he had not "come out" for the prince in the rebellion of 1745, in which a Jacobite army had mustered under the Stuart royal standard, entered Edinburgh and gone on to invade England, getting as far south as Derby before turning back. But if he had not joined the rebellion, Hugh nevertheless did not wish the prince to be captured on the Macdonalds' home turf.

Flora knew nothing of her stepfather's scheme when the prince arrived at her shieling on the night of June 20, 1746. The dramatic scene in which she was persuaded by the prince and his companions to take part in the dangerous enterprise has been told many times. Fraser shows that Flora was initially reluctant, and contrary to some popularized versions of events she was not acting alone: Her stepfather provided the passes to permit Flora to cross over to Skye with her maidservant, "Betty Burke"; her kinswoman Lady Clanranald helped Flora to sew the enormous gown that was Charles's disguise; the famous overnight journey by boat in late June included Flora, the prince and six other men.

Not until they reached the house of Lady Margaret Macdonald, at Monkstadt, Skye, did Flora's unique talents come into play, proving her an indispensable figure in ensuring the success of the escape. Lady Margaret, a secret supporter of the prince, informed the dismayed Flora that her house was surrounded by government militiamen. With the prince hiding on the shoreline below, Flora kept her head while she breakfasted with a militia lieutenant, convincing him that she was an innocent traveler. The original plan was for Flora to leave the prince at Monkstadt, but instead she crossed the island with "Betty Burke" to the capital, Portree, where on July 1 the two parted company forever.

Flora Macdonald, in a portrait from 1749.

Charles would be rescued by French ships that September, but Flora was soon apprehended by the British military. Her subsequent imprisonment transformed her into a celebrity. Confined aboard a British Navy vessel stationed near Edinburgh, she told her story to a stream of visitors, projecting herself as a young woman moved by a feminine sense of compassion to assist the fugitive prince. She would, she asserted, have helped anyone in distress in the same way. Her captors were charmed, calling her a "pretty young rebel" who was misled by others "who ought to have given her better advice." By the time she reached London, where she was sent to have her case examined by the Privy Council, the national press had taken up her adventure. She was feted in newspapers and pamphlets, and upon her release in 1747 came under the protection of a wealthy patroness who paid to have Flora's portrait painted.

While Flora was still a prisoner, a misogynistic anti-Jacobite tract called "The Female Rebels" appeared, caricaturing certain prominent Jacobite women as bloodthirsty and ambitious Lady Macbeths. Underscoring her subject's unique popularity, Fraser points out that the tract's author changed tack when he came to Flora: She erred out of a feminine sense of mercy and tenderness, he argued; the "frailty of her sex" should have protected her from punishment.

There were many other Jacobite women who risked their safety to support the rebellion, yet their names are barely mentioned in "Flora Macdonald." Their role in a conflict that rent Scottish society asunder is a fascinating topic, but one that Fraser does not investigate. It's a missed opportunity to explore the 18th-century attitudes toward women that underpinned Flora's enduring celebrity. She skillfully evaded the abuse that was routinely meted out to women even of the highest rank who stepped too far into the public eye and that would surely have been the lot of any middle-aged married woman who agreed to row to Skye with "Betty Burke."

Fraser's account of Flora's triumphant sojourn in London raises the question: Why did the English public forgive Flora for assisting a man who had invaded their country, his army stopping only 150 miles north of London? Thirty years later, during the American Revolution, the same forbearance was shown to the rebel general George Washington, who was lauded in the London press as the ideal of an Anglo-American officer. The English, who lacked the huge standing armies of absolute monarchies such as France, were proud to be a nation that rooted for underdogs. In 1747, after a year of Jacobite executions, Londoners welcomed a chance to be generous. Flora surely understood these cultural undercurrents when she so adeptly presented herself as a "pretty young rebel."

For the rest of her life, Flora embraced her role as the rescuer of Bonnie Prince Charlie. She was praised by Voltaire, visited by Dr. Johnson and in her old age was offered a pension by the future George IV. But in 1774 she and her husband, Allan Macdonald, emigrated to North Carolina, hoping to find there the success in farming that had eluded them in Scotland. The war that was about to sweep through the American colonies took the Macdonalds unprepared; they misunderstood their new, unstable political environment as thoroughly as Flora had understood the highland world of the 1745 rebellion. The second half of the book contains an impressively detailed account of the Macdonalds' involvement in a failed Loyalist uprising in North Carolina in 1776 and its aftermath. Caught in a second civil war thousands of miles from the first, the Macdonalds never fully recovered their financial losses, and they ended their days back on Skye, supported by family.

"Flora Macdonald" concludes with a welcome overview of how Flora's adventures in the 'Forty-five have been perpetuated in every type of media since her death in 1790. Delving deeper into the world Flora knew so well, however, might have shed more light on how this unusual woman so shrewdly negotiated the dangers of the last Jacobite rising, and, alone in the British metropolis, transformed herself into a celebrated figure in an age when women entered the public sphere at their peril. □

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