

Factor Mór
John Campbell of Ardmore, Islay
Chamberlain to the Duke of Argyll 1845-1870¹

Prelude

George William Campbell, the 6th Duke of Argyll, was notoriously profligate and parts of the Argyll Estate, including the Argyll lands in Coll, were sold off in 1816-1822 to pay for the Duke's mounting debts. However Tiree and the Ross of Mull were retained and the people living there continued their traditional land management ways with little interference. As the population increased the subdivision of tenancies into smaller and smaller land areas was permitted, and families struggled to survive on land areas that were too small to produce enough food to sustain them. Poverty became endemic.

The 6th Duke died in 1839 and was succeeded as 7th Duke by his brother, John Douglas Campbell. He was elderly and ill when he succeeded to the title and held it for only 8 years. In his later years many of his duties were taken over by his son, George Douglas Campbell, then just 23 years of age. Being aware of the estate's precarious financial position and the poverty of its people, many of whom could not pay their rent, the young man announced in a newspaper article his plan to resurrect the fortunes of the Argyll family. He contended that it was the proprietor's right to expel cottars and tenants of small acreages that could not support a family, and then to amalgamate the surrendered lands into larger self-supporting crofts or farms, the tenants of which would not default on rent payments. He succeeded to the title as 8th Duke when his father died in 1847 and immediately proceeded to implement his depopulation and restructuring plan for the Argyll Estate through his Chamberlain, John Campbell.

John Campbell of Ardmore



In 1845, during the period when George Douglas Campbell, the future 8th Duke of Argyll, was managing affairs on behalf of his father, John Campbell of Ardmore, Islay, was appointed Chamberlain to the Duke of Argyll. He became known and feared as Factor Mór, the Big Factor, who implemented the 8th Duke of Argyll's policies in the Ross of Mull and Tiree for the next 25 years.

John Campbell, the third of 11 children, and eldest son, of Archibald Campbell, tacksman of Ardmore, Islay, & Helen Campbell, was born on 16 March 1801. In 1845, he married Flora McNeill of Ellister, Islay. They had no children.

After his appointment as Chamberlain to the Duke of Argyll, John Campbell and his wife took up residence at Ardfenaig, Mull, which had previously been the home to the Macleans of Killean. It was a substantial property. In the 1851 census, John Campbell is recorded at Ardfenaig, aged 50, as "Factor & Farmer of 1380 Acres 200 Acres Arable with 9 Servants".

¹ Photo of John Campbell ,Factor Mór, from Currie, Jo (2000), *Mull The Island and its Peoples*.

By contemporary accounts of islanders in Mull and Tiree, Factor Mór is reputed to have been harsh, unbending and bullying in his treatment of cottar and tenants of small crofts, and eager to evict them. He remains a hated figure among the descendants of Tirisdeach that were evicted or otherwise ‘encouraged’ to emigrate in the 1840s and 1850s.

From all reports he was not a likeable man, and he may have been influenced by his upbringing to regard others less fortunate than him to be of lesser or no value. But the truth of his interaction with the people of Tiree and the Ross of Mull remains hidden in the Argyll Archives and the 8th Duke’s instructions to him and his reports to the 8th Duke. Until these documents are made public we will not know to what extent Factor Mór’s actions were his own or were demanded by instructions from the 8th Duke of Argyll.

John Campbell died aged 70 on 31 August 1872 at Ardfenaig, Mull, of “Disease of the Heart and Structural Weakness”, as certified by Donald Black M.B. His death is recorded on a stone at Kildalton High Cross, Islay, with the inscription²:

ERECTED
TO THE MEMORY OF
ARCHIBALD CAMPBELL, ARDMOIR.
HELEN CAMPBELL, ORMSARY
HIS SPOUSE.
AND OF JOHN CAMPBELL, THEIR SON,
FOR TWENTY SIX YEARS CHAMBERLAIN IN MULL,
TO HIS GRACE THE DUKE OF ARGYLL,
DIED AT ARDFENAIG,
31ST AUGUST 1872, AGED 70 YEARS.

Summary

The Argyll Estate documents relating to John Campbell’s time as Chamberlain to the 8th Duke of Argyll are in the Argyll Archives at Inveraray Castle and currently are not publicly available. One cannot evaluate John Campbell’s actions as the Duke of Argyll’s factor in Tiree and Mull without knowing the Duke’s instructions to him and his reports to the Duke, so such evaluation must wait until all the files are made available.

John Campbell bore the blame and enmity of Tirisdeach who emigrated from Tiree during his time as Factor for the Duke of Argyll, and that belief has been passed down to their descendants to this day.

The memories of many emigrants from Tiree to Canada or Australia in the 1840s and 1850s were bitter and were directed at John Campbell, the Duke of Argyll’s factor, not at the Duke himself, whose plan it was. This feeling was captured by Alex Dunedin (2019) in *The Highland Clearances: Reading History and Dispossession*³:

The whole process was enforced by the threat of the dread summons of removal. The factors on several estates came to resemble petty tyrants who ruled the people with an iron hand. One of the most notorious was John Campbell, the Factor Mor (Big Factor), Chamberlain of the Duke

² Transcription by John Gibb.

³ Dunedin, Alex (2019). *The Highland Clearances: Reading History and Dispossession*. Ragged University (<https://www.raggeduniversity.co.uk>)

of Argyll's lands in Mull and Tiree. When he died in 1872, emigrant communities across the Atlantic celebrated in uninhibited style, as reported in the satirical poem, Lament for the Factor Mór

*When they heard in Canada that the beast had expired
Bonfires were lit and banners attached to branches
The people were cock-a-hoop with joy
As they remember one another
And they all got down on their knees and praised God that you had died.*

- Keith Dash