

Edinburgh historian says Lord Lovat was no monster

He was the last man to be publicly beheaded in Britain, a notorious Jacobite lord whose last act of defiance is credited with being the origin of the saying “laughing your head off”.

Now, following the anniversary of his execution, on 9 April 1747, an Edinburgh historian has cast doubt on the “devious and duplicitous” reputation of Simon Fraser, 11th Lord Lovat.

Fraser was convicted of treason for his role in the Jacobite rising of 1745, and executed on Tower Hill in London.

For nearly 300 years, portrayals have focused on his violent feuding, changes of allegiance and his forced marriage to the widow of his predecessor.

In *Outlander*, in which he was played by Clive Russell, he is grandfather to Jamie Fraser, who describes him as “a terrible auld monster”.

Last year, Hollywood actor Russell Crowe revealed he was a distant relative of Fraser, describing him as “quite the character”, whose “Machiavellian ways caught up with him”.

But Michael Nevin, author and former chair of The 1745 Association, the organisation that commemorates the Jacobite era, said that Fraser had been “misrepresented” in history and fiction.

He insisted Fraser had been “judged solely by allegations made by his enemies” and was “a more sympathetic and even, in some respects, heroic” figure.

He said: “Simon Fraser, 11th Lord Lovat, is commonly portrayed in fiction and history as a devious, duplicitous, untrustworthy and generally unpleasant individual who got his just deserts when he was executed on April 9th 1747, thereby gaining the dubious distinction of being the last nobleman to be condemned by his peers in the House of Lords and the last man to be publicly beheaded in Britain.

“It has become conventional wisdom that he was a disreputable figure with no redeeming virtues. But a man should never be judged solely by allegations made by his enemies.

“I believe it is time to look again at Lord Lovat’s life and legacy.”

Lord Lovat was on the government side during the 1715 Jacobite Rising, but had switched allegiance by the time of the Battle of Culloden in 1746.

As head of Clan Fraser of Lovat, he ordered his clansmen to join Bonnie Prince Charlie’s Jacobite uprising under the command of his son, the master of Lovat.

While his son later surrendered and was pardoned, Lord Lovat was captured, found guilty of treason and beheaded.

At his execution, a grandstand collapsed resulting in the death of several spectators, much to the amusement of the elderly Fraser, whose mirth became the origin of the saying “laughing your head off”.

Mr Nevin cast doubt on popular portrayals of Lovat, however, insisting opposing views had been overlooked.

He has adapted the words of the warrior poet John Roy Stuart, an officer in the Jacobite army and Fraser’s long time friend,

into a new play.

John Roy Stuart – Culloden Day, premiered at The Royal Scots Club in Edinburgh this week on the anniversary of the Battle of Culloden, April 16.

Mr Nevin, who has studied John Roy's poems and letters, written in both Gaelic and English, said the play told Fraser's story through the eyes of his ally.

He added: "John Roy was a friend of Lord Lovat for more than 30 years and his poems and letters tell the story of his life. The play is all in John Roy's words, weaved into the narrative."

Nevin challenged Lord Lovat's reputation for violence and also accusations of rape and forced marriage, suggesting this was "part of a plot" against him.

He said: "Following the early death of his cousin Hugh Fraser, 9th Lord Lovat, the family of Hugh's widow, Amelia Murray, claimed that he had left his titles and estates to one of their allies.

"When this claim was challenged by Simon, the Atholl Murrays sent a 'Commission of Fire and Sword' into the Fraser lands and seized them by force.

"Simon led a company of Fraser clansmen who surrounded the Athollmen during the night and forced them to surrender at dawn.

"Unlike at Glencoe a few years earlier, not a drop of blood was shed, leading Lovat to adopt as his personal motto 'Sine Sanguine Victor' – Victor Without Bloodshed.

"The Atholl Murrays then pursued Lovat through the courts, alleging that he had raped and forced marriage on Amelia.

"These allegations leave a number of questions unanswered.

Why, despite intense pressure from her family, did Amelia Murray resolutely refuse to testify against Lord Lovat? Why did she stay with him for several months after the alleged forced marriage until, under sentence of death, Lovat fled into exile? Why did she reportedly declare her love for him?

“Then there is the curious position of His Grace the Duke of Argyll, who consistently supported Lovat during this period. Surely Argyll would have kept his distance from Lovat had he truly believed the lurid tales of debauchery put about by his arch rival for power and influence in Scotland, the Duke of Atholl.

“If Argyll believed these allegations to be false and part of a plot by the Atholl Murrays to seize Lovat’s titles and estates, then his support for Lovat becomes not only understandable, but justifiable.”



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He added: "Some forty years later, in September 1745, John Roy was sent by Prince Charlie to Castle Dounie to persuade Lord Lovat to throw in his lot with the Jacobite Rising.

"However, Lovat is wary of committing himself because, should the Rising not be successful, it could have severe

consequences for his entire clan.

“He instead agrees to a compromise whereby his son and heir, the Master of Lovat, will raise a Fraser Regiment for the Prince, but without his explicit support.

“Lord Lovat’s ambiguous position has been taken as further evidence of his duplicity. However, it was no different to the position taken by a number of other leading Scottish families at that difficult time, with one son rising for the Prince while the other stayed at home, so that the family would survive whatever the outcome.

“A man should never be judged solely by allegations made by his enemies. The views of his friends should also be taken into account.

“Seen through John Roy’s eyes, Lord Lovat emerges as a more sympathetic, and even in some respects heroic, figure than commonly portrayed in works of fiction and conventional histories.

“This may be an appropriate moment to re-appraise Lord Lovat’s picaresque life and legacy.”