

## From the Moon to the Vale

The battle was over and all seemed lost. Cromwell's roundheads had triumphed over the Scots Royalist army at Worcester. Three thousand of King Charles's men had been killed, but eighteen-year-old John MacBean of Strathdearn in Inverness-shire had come through the conflict with his life. He was one of some ten thousand prisoners. As one of the many captured Scots who were deported to the Americas, John arrived aboard the vessel "John and Sara" at Boston, Massachusetts, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1652. With other prisoners he was marched to the town of Lynn. There he was sold as an indentured servant – which is to say a slave – to the owner of a saw-mill in Exeter, New Hampshire. His master was one Nicholas Lissen, and John would have been in servitude to that man for seven years, but for one thing... Lissen's daughter, Hannah, fell in love with the young Scotsman. Fortunately, the master looked on the romance with favour. John and Hannah married and had a family.

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Clifton Williams, a thirty-five year old NASA astronaut, was flying a T-38 jet trainer from Cape Canaveral. It was October the 5<sup>th</sup> 1967 and the pilot was on his way to visit his ailing father in Mobile, Alabama. A mechanical failure caused Williams to lose control of the aircraft. The jet crashed, and although the pilot used his ejector seat, he was killed. His tragic death left a vacancy in NASA's Apollo programme.

Commander Pete Conrad recalled a particularly promising pupil from his days as a Naval Flight Test School instructor. Accordingly he personally requested that Alan Bean – a descendant, as it happened, of the indentured servant, John MacBean – take the place of Williams in the Apollo team.

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Fifty-two seconds after blast-off the Saturn V rocket of Apollo 12 was struck by lightning. Remedial action carried out by Lunar Module Pilot Alan Bean restored telemetry and saved the mission.

Commanded by Pete Conrad, with Command Module Pilot Richard F. Gordon, and Alan Bean, "Yankee Clipper" landed safely on the Ocean of Storms. On 19<sup>th</sup> November 1969 Alan Bean became the fourth human being to walk on the surface of the moon.

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As an impressionable young man, in my early twenties, I discovered the writings of the Scottish historical novelist, Nigel Tranter. His “MacGregor Trilogy” particularly fuelled my romantic patriotism, and I became a Tranter devotee, reading, in the years to come, dozens of his titles. I had artistic leanings and I responded to symbols. As I became absorbed by these accounts of the Jacobite Clan Gregor – with so much of its story unfolding in the nearby mountains of Loch Lomondside – one idiosyncratic side effect was that I developed an increasing interest in the history of Highland tartans – those vivid symbols of Scottish identity – and so commenced decades of reading and investigation.

One day early in June 2008, I received a phone call. It was from a Mr Brian Wilton, the Director of the Scottish Tartans Authority. As a result of the call, I soon thereafter found myself doing research and writing occasional articles for the Tartans Authority. I was now retired, nearing sixty, and I was able to devote much of my spare time to this work on tartan. In February of 2011, I was looking for a certain flourish with which to round off an article I’d been writing concerning the 1746 Dress Act, which had made the wearing of tartan by men in the Scottish Highlands illegal. I was looking for some way of illustrating that tartan had transcended its Highland or Scottish roots to become internationally iconic. I had read over my last few words –

*“In 1782, thanks largely to the efforts of the Duke of Montrose, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Dress Act was repealed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century tartan-clad soldiers of the Highland regiments contributed much in blood and gallantry to the creation and defence of the British Empire. In our own day tartan is loved throughout the world...”*

Then I remembered a unique historic incident the recollection of which brought a wildly ambitious notion to my mind. After the first flush of excitement I decided I’d better not embark on this without official backing. Accordingly I put the idea to Brian Wilton, who replied –

*“It would be excellent Willie since that episode is what I start all tartan talks off with. That's the first I knew that he had retained some tartan - in your searches - any idea what his contact details might be?”*

The episode in question had happened on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November 1969, when astronaut Alan Bean landed on the moon... with a square yard of the MacBean clan tartan. The Lunar Module Pilot had been so proud of

his Scottish ancestry that he'd secretly taken this symbol of it with him on the Apollo 12 mission. I knew this. I knew also that Bean had taken the tartan back to earth and that now, over forty years later, that selfsame piece of tartan remained in the retired astronaut's possession.

By great good fortune accessing Alan Bean's contact details was not at all difficult. This was because he had spent many years working as an artist, painting stunning pictures of moon scenes. I made contact through the Alan Bean Gallery website. Neither I, nor the director, seriously expected success. I was sure that my request would be fielded by some administrator and never even reach Alan Bean. To my astonishment, the following day I received an email from the astronaut himself.

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One morning near the end of March I saw the postman walking up to my door. The postie could not have imagined in his wildest dreams just how far the content of this particular letter had travelled. I immediately recognized the decorative stamp of the Scottish Tartans Authority on the little buff envelope. I dared to hope. When carefully opened, the envelope yielded a single sheet of A4, attached to which were six short woollen threads. Green, black and purple.

On the top-right the page bore an image of one of Alan Bean's paintings. It showed three astronauts on the surface of the moon. The handwritten message read as follows –

*“15<sup>th</sup> March 2011 (My 79<sup>th</sup> Birthday)*

*To the Scottish Tartans Authority. This piece of MacBean tartan was flown to the moon in our Apollo 12 Command Module “Yankee Clipper”. It was then transferred to our Lunar Module “Intrepid” and was landed on the moon, November 19, 1969. I am entrusting this valuable piece of tartan history to your care.”*

*It was signed – Alan Bean Lunar Module Pilot*

The moonwalker had generously sent, to the STA, a six inches by nine inches cutting from the actual piece which he had taken with him to the moon and back. Brian Wilton had, with great care, removed these six loose threads and passed them on to myself.

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I looked at them and thought of the lives and the events which had been interwoven to bring those shreds of wool into my possession. It was amazing... You couldn't make it up.

## Alan Bean

APOLLO 12 AND SKYLAB 3 ASTRONAUT  
ARTIST

Lunar Module Pilot of Apollo 12. The fourth human to set foot on the moon.

Mission Commander of Skylab 3, our first space station. Spent 59 days in orbit 270 miles above the earth.

Now an artist, creating paintings that record for future generations mankind's first exploration of another world.

The painting reproduced to the right is titled "Conrad Gordon and Bean, The Fantasy." Pete Conrad and I wished that Dick Gordon could join us on the lunar surface, but he was orbiting some 60 miles above taking care of the command module — our only way home.

In this painting I have brought Dick the last 60 miles.



15 MARCH 2011  
(MY 79<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY)

TO THE SCOTTISH TARTAN AUTHORITY

THIS PIECE OF MAC BEAN TARTAN  
WAS FLOWN TO THE MOON IN  
OUR APOLLO 12 COMMAND MODULE  
"YANKEE CLIPPER". IT WAS THEN  
TRANSFERRED TO OUR LUNAR MODULE  
"INTREPID" AND WAS LANDED ON  
THE MOON, NOVEMBER 19, 1969.

I AM ENTHUSIASTIC THIS VALUABLE  
PIECE OF TARTAN HISTORY TO YOUR  
CARE.

Alan Bean  
Lunar Module Pilot

(Address obscured to preserve privacy)

I was thus able to complete my article on the 1746 “Dress Act” with these words –

“Earlier this year Commander Bean generously gifted a part of that very piece of tartan to the Scottish Tartans Authority. Aye, tartan may be said to have gone a long way since Alan Bean’s ancestors fought for Bonnie Prince Charlie on Culloden Moor.”

William Scobie