

A dinner date at Castle Dounie

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

BEAUFORT Castle, the home of the Frasers of Lovat, had to be sold a few weeks ago as a result of the Fraser family's gross mismanagement of their inheritance. The buyer was Mrs Ann Gloag of Perth, termed by Brian Wilson "the Stagecoach bus pirate". Mrs Gloag has just been named as Scotland's richest woman; her mother, apparently, was a Fraser. She will have to bid separately for the house's priceless contents, which will shortly be going under the hammer.

But what does this have to do with the Quern-Dust Calendar? Well, I want to continue looking at the Highlands through the eyes of some early visitors, and there is a splendidly revealing story to be told of a visit to Beaufort Castle in 1725 or thereabouts.

Let me set the scene. The Welshman Thomas Pennant came that way from Inverness in 1769, riding "close to the water-edge through woods of alder". Passing near the houses of several Fraser tacksmen, he reached "Castle Dunie, the site of the house of their chieftain Lord Lovat". Beaufort Castle, *Caisteal Dhùnaidh* and Castle Dunie (or Dounie) were originally one and the same; the three names simply reflect the languages spoken by the Lovat family down through the centuries, Norman French, Gaelic and English.

Pennant goes on: "The old house, which was very mean, was burnt down in 1746; but a neat box, the residence of the hospitable factor, is built in its stead on a high bank well wooded, over the pretty river Bewley, or Beaulieu. The country, for a certain circuit, is fertile, well cultivated, and smiling. The bulk of Lord Lovat's estate was in these parts; the rest, to the amount of £500 per annum, in Straitherick. He was a potent chieftain, and could raise about 1,000 men; but I found his neighbors spoke as unfavorably of him, as his enemies did in the most distant parts of the kingdom."

When the Forfeited Estates were restored to the heirs of their previous owners a few years later, the government's "neat box" began its transformation into the opulent Beaufort Castle now owned by the Pirate Queen, while *Caisteal Dhùnaidh* remained the name for the old scorched ruin a little to the east. As for Lord Lovat, this was of course the devious and violent Simon Fraser who had been an active Jacobite in 1702, then came out for the Government in 1715, but allowed his son to bring the Frasers out for Prince Charles in 1745, and was beheaded for treason at the Tower of London in 1747 when about eighty years old.

Lord Lovat's visitor around 1725 — when he was in his fifties — was Captain Edmund Burt. Of Burt himself we know little, in fact his name may have been Edward and he may not even have been a captain. He left a series of 'Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London', first published under that title in 1754 when they had ceased to have implications for national security. He appears to have been an agent of the Government stationed mainly in Inverness, and his task had something to do with servicing or provisioning the regiment of engineers which commenced the building of roads through the Highlands in 1726.

'Spy' is one possible word for Burt, but spies come in many shapes and sizes. We know nothing of his formal dispatches, but in his 'Letters' Burt comes over as an eighteenth-century Derek Cooper. He has a very good opinion of the Highland people, and is voluble, reasonable, entirely likeable, humorous, capable of a joke against himself, highly observant, gossipy, a stickler for cleanliness, a lover of good wine — and, yes, very, very fussy about his food. Here is a typical Burt joke: an English gentleman, finding himself in an inn on his way to Inverness, had some butter set before him in which were a great number of hairs; whereupon he called to the landlady, desiring she would bring him some butter upon one plate and the hairs upon another, and he would mix them himself.

On, then, to Burt's trip to the "very mean" Castle Dounie. The castle is not named, nor is Simon Fraser, but their identity is clear from the start. Burt, we must remember, is writing from Inverness. "Several of us (the English) have been, by invitation, to dine with an eminent chief, not many miles from hence, in the Highlands; but I do assure you it was his importunity (the effect of his interest) and our own curiosity, more than any particular inclination, that induced us to a compliance."

The pains taken by Burt to distance himself from the old schemer are quite remarkable. He normally speaks of people of all classes with warmth and sympathy; the fine distinction drawn here between 'curiosity' and 'inclination' is unique in his letters. What is more, the group took extraordinary care not to be either early or late, as if the main aim of the visit were simply to avoid giving offence. "We set out early in the morning without guide or interpreter, and passed a pretty wide river, into the county of Ross, by a boat that we feared would fall to pieces in the passage. This excursion was made in order to [pay] a short visit on that side the Murray Frith, and to lengthen out the way, that we might not be too early with our noble host."

They would have taken the old road through Kirkhill and crossed directly into Beaulie at a point downriver from the present road and rail bridges. Whom, if anybody, they visited in Beaulie, Burt does not say; probably they just passed the time in the inn. Their ten-mile ride from Inverness would have taken two or three hours, so they probably reached Beaulie about 10 a.m. "Our first visit being dispatched, we changed our course, and as the sailor says, stood directly, as we thought, for the castle of our inviter; but we soon strayed out of our way among the hills, where there was nothing but heath, bogs, and stones, and no visible track to direct us, it being across the country."

In other words, they got the ferry back across the Beaulie to where they had left their horses, then struck out southwards roughly along the line of the present A862 and A833, so avoiding the meanderings of the river. "In our way we inquired of three several [i.e. separate] Highlanders, but could get nothing from them

but *Haniel Sasson Uggit*. We named the title of our chief, and pointed with the finger; but he was known to none of them, otherwise than by his patronymic, which none of us knew at that time.”

Burt was no linguist. In a previous letter he had remarked that very often if one asked questions of ordinary people in and around Inverness they would reply, *Haniel Sasson Uggit*, that is, “they have, or speak, no *Saxon* (or English)”. They would, of course, have said no such thing. Burt’s *Chan eil Sasann agad* means “You don’t have England”, which is nonsense. What he meant was *Chan eil Beurla agam*, “I don’t have English.” Moreover, Burt and his colleagues were asking for directions to “Lord Lovat” when he was universally known to the people by his patronymic, *MacShimidh*. And perhaps they made things worse by calling his house “Beaufort Castle” when it was known to the people as *Caisteal Dhùmaidh*.

“But if we had been never so well acquainted with his ancestry name, it would have stood us in little stead, unless we had known likewise how to persuade some one of those men to show us the way. At length we happened to meet with a gentleman, as I supposed, because he spoke English, and he told us we must go west a piece (though there was no appearance of the sun), and then incline to the north; that then we were to go along the side of a hill, and ascend another (which to us was then unseen), and from the top of it we should see the castle. I should have told you, that in this part of our peregrination we were upon the borders of the mountains only; and the hills, for the most part, not much higher than Hampstead or Highgate. No sooner had he given us this confused direction, but he skipped over a little bog, that was very near us, and left us to our perplexed consultations.”

They seem to have been wandering about on Phoinneas Hill, between Kirkhill and Kiltarlity. By now it was certainly midday and they were feeling as all of us feel when we have tried so hard to avoid being early for an appointment that we have ended up being late. “However, at last we gained the height; but when we were there, one of our company began to curse the Highlander for deceiving us, being prepossessed with the notion of a *castle*, and seeing only a house hardly fit for one of our farmers of fifty pounds a-year; and in the court-yard a parcel of low outhouses, all built with turf, like other Highland huts.”

It was notoriously difficult in the Highlands to tell a house from its outhouses. Dorothy Wordsworth was to remark in 1803 that “where there is any land belonging to the Highland huts there are so many out-buildings near, which differ in no respect from the dwelling-houses except that they send out no smoke, that one house looks like two or three”. Lovat is of course not to be scorned for living like his tenants, but praised for it. Anyway, he came out to greet them in the Highland manner, no doubt having been duly informed of the party of Englishmen wandering around his estate. “When we approached this *castle*, our chief with several attendants (for he had seen us on the hill), came a little way to meet us; gave us a welcome, and conducted us into a parlour pretty well furnished. After some time, we had notice given us that dinner was ready in another room; where we were no sooner sat down to table, but a band of music struck up in a little place out of sight, and continued playing all the time of dinner. These concealed musicians he would have had us think were his constant domestics; but I saw one of them, some time after dinner, by mere chance, whereby I knew they were brought from this town to regale us with more magnificence.”

There is culture-clash here, and it shows. Lovat tries to live according to his means, but to entertain according to his visitors’ expectations. Where does the latter lead? To Mrs Gloag. “Our entertainment consisted of a great number of dishes, at a long table, all brought in under covers, but almost cold. What the greatest part of them were I could not tell, nor did I inquire, for they were disguised after the French manner; but there was placed next to me a dish, which I guessed to be boiled beef — I say that was my conjecture, for it was covered all over with stewed cabbage, like a smothered rabbit, and over all a deluge of bad butter. When I had removed some of the encumbrance, helped myself, and tasted, I found the pot it was boiled in had given it too high a *goût* for my palate, which is always inclined to plain eating. I then desired one of the company to help me to some roasted mutton, which was indeed delicious, and therefore served very well for my share of all this inelegant and ostentatious plenty.”

Burt is in his element. “We had very good wine, but did not drink much of it; but one thing I should have told you was intolerable, viz. the number of Highlanders that attended at table, whose feet and foul linen, or woollen, I don’t know which, were more than a match for the odour of the dishes. The conversation was greatly engrossed by the Chief, before, at, and after dinner; but I do not recollect any thing was said that is worth repeating.”

His conclusion serves to remind us that these men, riding home together in the gathering dusk, had their heads protected by three-cornered hats atop powdered wigs. “There were, as we went home, several descants upon our feast; but I remember one of our company said he had tasted a pie, and that many a peruke had been baked in a better crust. When we were returned hither in the evening we supped upon beef-steaks, which some, who complained they had not made a dinner, rejoiced over, and called them a luxury. I make little doubt but, after our noble host had gratified his ostentation and vanity, he cursed us in his heart for the expense, and that his family must starve for a month to retrieve the profusion; for this is according to his known character.”

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