

‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ (2)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I introduced the great old song ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’, which praises the MacKenzies and mocks the Munros. But what exactly is it about?

On 6 September 1715 the Earl of Mar raised the Jacobite standard on the Braes of Mar, emblazoned with the thistle, the arms of Scotland, and ‘No Union’. The ’15 had begun. Brigadier Macintosh of Borlum, who had distinguished himself in the French service, marched west with 500 men, seized Inverness Castle and proclaimed James VIII at the mercat cross.

He was soon followed by another Jacobite, William, Earl and Marquis of Seaforth and Chief of the MacKenzies, who returned home with his troops to Brahan Castle near Dingwall. William — *Uilleam Dubh* — had been brought up in France, where his father, Kenneth, the fourth earl, had been in exile for his devotion to the Stuarts.

Towards the end of September Macintosh marched south with his troops to join Mar at Perth. Seaforth, who was himself expected to join Mar as soon as possible, sent Sir John MacKenzie of Coul into Inverness to take his place.

Meantime Seaforth’s forces were gathering at Brahan, causing a great deal of apprehension among the neighbouring Munros of Ferindonald and the people of Easter Ross generally. Captain George Munro, son of Sir Robert Munro of Foulis, chief of the clan, whom the Whig government had appointed commander of Inverness castle, formed a camp at Bridge of Alness, occupying a position on the east side of the river Averon where it flows out of a long, deep gorge. The purpose was twofold — to protect the Munros and other Whig clans from depredations by Seaforth’s forces, and also, by maintaining a threat to his own country from the rear, to prevent Seaforth marching south to join Mar at Perth.

On 29 September, Hugh Ross of Tollie presented the Burgh Council of Tain with a letter from John, Earl of Sutherland, as the King’s Lord Lieutenant of Ross, directing them to oppose ‘such as shall after a traitorous and rebellious manner pretend to enter the Burgh in order to proclaim the Pretender’. They appointed fifty men with four days’ provisions to march to Alness to join the Laird of Foulis. With the Munros and other Rosses, there were now 600 men at the camp at Alness.

Next to arrive were the Earl of Sutherland, his son Lord Strathnaver, and George, Lord Reay, with their Sutherlands and MacKays from the north. Some Frasers, Grants and Forbeses also came in, swelling the Whig force to about 1,800 men. In return for the co-operation of the Forbeses, Col. Munro sent 200 men across the Cromarty Firth to protect Ferintosh against MacKenzie depredations.

However, Seaforth’s army, already about equal in size to Munro’s, was now strengthened with the arrival of MacDonalds, MacKinnons, Chisholms, MacRaes and others until it amounted to nearly 3,000 men. Conscious of the difficulty of a frontal attack on an enemy strongly protected by the river Averon, on 8 October Seaforth detached a portion of his forces to cross the hill ground behind Dingwall, ford the river about six miles above Alness, and take the enemy in their flank and rear, while he himself advanced eastwards along the north shore of the Firth.

The plan succeeded. The Whig clans, now commanded by Sutherland and MacKay, found that their position was in danger of being turned. If they had waited to be attacked, their situation would have been hopeless. On 13 October they scattered in all directions. As our song declares:

*B’e ’n t-amadan Fear Fòlais
Nuair thòisich e cogadh riut;
Rothaich agus Ròsaich —
Bu ghòrach na bodaich iad.
Frisealaich is Granndaich,
An campa cha stadadh iad,
'S thug Foirbeisich 'nan deann-ruith
Gu seann taigh Chùil Lodair orr'.*

(“The Laird of Foulis was a fool / When he went to war with you; / Munros and Roses — / Silly old clowns they were. / Frasers and Grants, / In camp they wouldn’t stop, / And Forbeses fled in confusion / To the old house of Culloden.”) Why the Rosses (*Rosaich*) aren’t mentioned I’m not sure, but *Ròsaich* (Roses) is required to rhyme with *ghòrach*, and no doubt some Roses of Kilravock were there. Anyway,

*Theich iad uile is cha d’fhuirich
An treas duine bh’ acasan;
An t-Iarla Catach ruith e dhachaigh,
Cha do las a dhagachan;
MacAoidh nan creach gun thàrr e ás,
Sann dh’éigh e ’n t-each a b’ aigeannaich
Ri gabhail an ratreuta
Nuair dh’éirich do chabar ort!*

“They all fled, there did not wait / Even one man in three of them; / The Earl of Sutherland ran home, / His pistols did not fire; / Plundering MacKay took off, / Calling for the fastest horse / To make his retreat with / When your antlers rose over you!”

In the Whig camp was a young divinity student, Aeneas Sage, a native of Redcastle in the Black Isle who later became minister of Lochcarron. Many years later his grandson, the Rev. Donald Sage, described the incident in his memoirs, which were published as ‘Memorabilia Domestica’. While the men were in full retreat up the hill, Aeneas — a giant of a man, six feet two in height — confronted Lord Reay. “It is a pity, my lord,” he said, “that such a brave body of men, and they Highlanders, should be seen turning their backs upon their enemies when they have right on their side.”

“What you say, young man, may be true,” replied the MacKay chief. “But is it not better to make a wise retreat than

a foolish engagement?"

Professor W J Watson commented drily: "This is the old Gaelic view, *is fhearr teicheadh tràth na droch fhuireach.*" ("Better flee early than make a bad stand.") Or, as Nicolson has it in his 'Gaelic Proverbs', *Is fhearr teicheadh math, na droch fhuireach*, which he translates: "Better a good retreat than stay to suffer."

The Sutherland men headed straight for Bonar, going across the high moors by Struie. "I have seen you armed with guns, / Ready, prepared and well-equipped," exults the song. "Chasing Munros is your excellent pastime, / You gave them their morning dip; / Sutherland men performed no exploits, / Their strength deserted them in fright / At seeing the deer's head on you / When your antlers rose over you!"

Rosses went north and east, Forbeses and Grants fled across the Cromarty Firth. "That's where there was terror / As we chased them over passes, / South of us and north of us / Fleeing fast from your headgear / Like a bird-flock from the bleak hills / With everyone scowling, / Descending from the mountain-tops / To plains and to sea-shores."

On 14 October, at a meeting of Tain Burgh Council, Bailie Robert Ross presented a bill drawn by Lord Duffus, 'commander of a considerable partie of the rebels that cam heir from the Earle of Seaforth his camp', upon the Magistrates for payment to him of £6 5s 2d sterling for His Majestie King James VIII's use. This the Magistrates agreed to do under protest, 'to prevent further trouble to the toun'. And there is a reference in the Tain presbytery records of 18 October to 'the confusions and troubles occasioned in the County by the Mackenzies, MacDonalds, and Chisholms, and other rebels'.

As for the Munros, they fended for themselves as best they could. "They called a ferry, got a coble, / And took little credit from what happened then. / What bad thing had fired them up / When no spark could light their muskets / And so many Munro grandees / Went floating head-over-heels (*Dol air flod thar chlaigeannan*)? / They took to retreat / When your antlers rose over you!"

The Munro country suffered badly, though as far as can be judged the opponents never actually came to blows, and Seaforth's victory seems to have been bloodless. Presbytery records tell us that the libraries in the manse of Alness were burned. So apparently was Evanton, then and till much later known as *am Baile Nodha* or *am Bail' Ùr*. "You put down the Clan Munro / Though they considered it impudent, / Driving them before you in a fearful rout / While *am Baile Nodha* went up in sparks / With flames rising to the skies / When your antlers rose over you!"

Watson, who was a native of the area as well as being Scotland's leading authority on place-names, was a little puzzled by this. He wrote: "Am Baile Nodha must have been a very insignificant place in 1715; in 1791 the minister of Kiltarn, describing his parish for the Old Statistical Account, makes no mention of it, though he mentions the 'small village of Drummond, situated in a level field contiguous to the river Skiach. This village is yet in its infancy.'"

He goes on: "Drummond is a little to the west of Evanton; the Skiach flows between the two places. The New Statistical Account of 1841 states that Evanton had no existence as a village thirty years before the time of writing, i.e., in 1810. In English form Am Baile Nodha appears as Newton, the name of a farm on the left side of the Allt Grannda, near Novar Station."

Seaforth was now able to go and join Mar, but the delay caused by what Watson calls 'the Alness affair' proved very harmful to the Jacobite cause. An early and decisive battle would have brought over the waverers — people like the Frasers. When it came, it was late and humiliating. At Sheriffmuir on 13 November, 1,000 troops under Argyll held off almost 4,000 Jacobites under Mar. The man it was all supposed to be about, 'James VIII', the Old Pretender, didn't arrive from France till 22 December (at Peterhead), by which time the rising was a spent force. He was crowned at Scone, but by 4 February he was safely aboard ship at Montrose and heading home for France.

Seaforth joined him again in exile. "So that's how it is, O world — / How fickle and changeable you are! / I have seen, O Seaforth / Of the fierce sounding pipes, / That there was no tribe in Scotland, / Though Mac Caillein might come close, / Who'd hold up their face to you / When your antlers rose over you!"

'Moladh Chabar Féidh' was clearly composed in 1716, for much of it consists of loyal toasts to the chief over the water. "Here's a toast to the deer's antlers, / A cheerful and a merry one; / Though they're far from their country, / Son of God, speed them to their land. / May I be hanged and crucified / And may I not enjoy my clothes (*m' éideadh nar mheala mi*) / If I don't rejoice to see you rise / With the brave strength of all who're kin!" As Dwelly points out, *Gum meal's gun caith thu e!* ("May you enjoy and wear it!") is said to a person who wears a new garment for the first time, and considered unlucky if first said to the wearer by a female; *Na'n na mheal thu e!* "May you never enjoy it! — Never live to wear it."

The song describes Seaforth's territory under the alien rule of Forfeited Estates Commissioners. "For me to get my wishes / (It's what woke me from my slumber) / He to whom the elements submit / And whom everything obeys / Must hurry you to your country / With dignity and honour — / You wouldn't leave to Lowlanders / What didn't belong to them. / You'd defeat men of business / No matter who'd quarrel with you."

In 1726 Seaforth was pardoned by King George and returned to Brahan, so fulfilling the song's prediction: "Once again you will be cheerful / In battlemented Brahan — / With your father's kin attending you, / Who would dare to threaten you? / Wine will be drunk all over your house / And the whisky of the still, / And many pipes will be tuned / When your antlers rise over you!"

But our poet just couldn't leave the Munros alone. As we saw last time, for some reason the place in their territory singled out for mention is Assynt, behind Evanton. "When the Marquis comes home to us / With the fine men that will serve him, / Numerous horsemen will come to your conflict, / Staying with you over to Assynt, / Who'd mount an attack upon their castle / Till every stone of it was knocked down. / When a levy's raised by William / Your antlers rise over you!"

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