

The Mull Men's Ford revisited

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW months ago (on 1 December 2000, to be precise) I wrote a piece on this page about Col. Donald Murchison (1687–1737?), a fascinating Ross-shire character who deserves to be as well known as Rob Roy, and for very similar reasons. He was a man of the people who knew how to stand up against authority.

Since then I have published a little more about him in a book called 'An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse', the reason being that he seems to be obliquely mentioned in that great satirical song 'Moladh Chabair Féidh'.

In this and the next two or three articles I would like to come back to this Rob Roy of the North and examine in detail some aspects of his life and times. I won't be repeating myself, because I have some fresh sources, and will be sticking to them. In particular, I will be making use of an account of the Murchisons of Auchtertyre in Lochalsh. This appears originally to have been in the handwriting of Captain Alexander Matheson of Dornie. It was given about 1880 to William Mackay, Inverness. Either he or Alexander Carmichael had it typed, and the typescript is now MS 123 in the Carmichael–Watson Collection in Edinburgh University Library.

According to Captain Matheson, Col. Murchison was the eldest son of John Murchison, tacksman of Bundaloch in Kintail and second son of Donald Murchison of Auchtertyre. His mother was a daughter of Alexander MacLennan in Morvich in Kintail. He had a brother Murdoch and two sisters, Margaret and Christiana.

At his birth, he was a sickly baby with a squint in one eye. It didn't seem likely that he would survive, but the midwife said that if he lasted twenty-four hours he would live to become as brave a man as any in his day or generation. And sure enough he survived.

He was sent to a school kept by his grand-uncle Alexander Matheson of Bennetsfield in the Black Isle and taught by a Mr Thomson. From there he went to Edinburgh University where he somehow received a grounding in military tactics as well as a good classical education. Then he served an apprenticeship as a writer (solicitor) and spent some time as factor to Sir John Preston of Preston Hall in Midlothian.

At the outbreak of the 1715 rising King James (the Pretender, let's call him) sent him a colonel's commission from France, and his chief, the young Marquis of Seaforth, made him one of the lieutenant colonels in his army. Murdoch Matheson (An t-Aosdàna MacMhathain, Seaforth's poet) said:

*Bidh an ceannard seòlta
De'n gairmear Dòmhnall
A' dol an òrdugh
Le sluagh do thìre.*

("The cunning colonel / Whose name is Donald / Will take command / Of your country's people.")

Before marching off to the campaign, the Lochalsh and Kintail men assembled at Eilean Donnain, where they danced on the leaden roof of the castle. Thanks to the pusillanimous leadership of Seaforth and the Earl of Mar, they were cut to pieces at the indecisive battle of Sheriffmuir, but the survivors continued in arms under Murchison until the Pretender fled to France and Seaforth to Lewis.

When Seaforth followed the Pretender to France he left his affairs in Murchison's hands as factor. Along with sixty of the most active and daring men in Kintail and Lochalsh, Murchison swore 'that they would defend the Seaforth Estates against all troops that the Government might send against them and count it a meritorious act to kill any man who attempted the same either at a market or in Church or any other place he might be found by any of them'.

Murchison behaved very creditably once again in the little rising of 1719 which came

to an end at Glenshiel, where a Spanish invasion force was defeated and Seaforth was wounded in the knee by a musket ball. Murchison and Christopher MacRae, a son of the tacksman of Inverinate, then fortified Eilean Donnain Castle, of which the Murchisons were hereditary keepers.

They were fired on by a warship, and Murchison realised that if a government garrison was planted there as had happened long since at Inverlochy, Invergarry and Caisteal Tioram, it would become impossible to defend the Seaforth country. So he blew up the castle, this being easily done by setting a match to the powder magazine. The silver plate and other valuables in the castle were said to have been thrown into the well. Writing in the 1790s, the minister of Kintail said that the castle was ‘long ruined’ and ‘clad from base to summit with beautiful ivy’, but of course in the twentieth century it was restored.

When Seaforth’s wounds were healed Murchison escorted him to Lewis with the Earl Marischal and the Marquis of Tullibardine to look for a ship that would take them to France. Murdoch Matheson made a marvellous song about the voyage, part of which I published at pp. 471–72 of ‘An Lasair’. Another of the verses goes:

*Ma sheòl thu ’m bàrc thar fairge uainn,
Thu fhéin ’s do chòirneal Calmanach
Fhuair cliù an cùirt nan Albannach,
Gur ioma tùrn a dh’earbte ris —
B’e siud an leóghann ainmeil
Bu mhór seanchas aig gach bòrd.*

(“Though you left us behind when you sailed away, / Yourself and that Murchison colonel of yours / Who earned his fame in the Scottish court, / Many duties would be entrusted to him – / He was the celebrated lion / Much talked about at every table.”)

With Seaforth safely abroad once again, his kinsmen set about collecting his rents and transmitting them to him. The chief agents were Murchison himself, MacKenzie of Fairburn, Colin MacKenzie of Kennacraig and Simon MacKenzie of Allangrange.

By 1720 Seaforth’s estate was forfeit by Act of Parliament, and the Forfeited Estates Commissioners in Edinburgh made the first of three attempts to make good their claim to it. This involved harassment of Seaforth tenants by certain kindreds loyal to Government – Munroes, Rosses, MacKays, Forbeses of Culloden.

The result was a pitched battle in which the harassers were routed on the banks of the Conon, after which Murchison and Murdoch Matheson the poet rescued Brahan Castle from the hands of Munro of Foulis. This, says Captain Matheson, is what led the poet to compose ‘the celebrated Clan song of Caberfeidh and Piobairaic to the Earl of Seaforth’. Whether by the latter he means ‘Fàilte Uilleim Dhuibh’ (‘The Earl of Seaforth’s Salute’) I’m not sure.

The Commissioners’ second attempt, in 1721, involved a more careful strategy. First came the kid glove. Officers were sent in to assure Seaforth’s tenants of good treatment if they submitted. These were sent packing, so Phase Two was activated immediately. It consisted of clear leadership, formal military involvement, and a strike against Kintail and Lochalsh – the eighteenth-century equivalent of an Exocet.

The leader was William Ross, laird of Easter Fearn in Easter Ross and a former provost of Tain, whom the Commissioners formally appointed as factor to the forfeited estates of Glenmoriston and Strathglass as well as Seaforth. Captain Matheson calls him William Munro, and in one place ‘William Munro or Ross’, demonstrating clearly that the Wester Ross folk regarded Munros and Rosses as one and the same. (This explains why Rosses are not mentioned in the standard version of ‘Moladh Chabair Féidh’.)

Ross brought with him his own tenants and servants and a detachment of soldiers from Inverness. He held his court (*mòd*) in Strathglass, where some of the people made verbal submissions. Then he marched west towards Kintail through Glen Affric.

Murchison got ready to meet them at Beul Àtha nam Muileach, the ‘Mull Men’s Ford’ where a mountain stream cascades out of a gorge to empty itself into the head of Loch

Affric. He and some of his best men hid in the heather in order to surround Ross's column as it advanced, two abreast, up the pass. He stationed others on Torran na Beithe, 'Birch Hillock'. Ross's party moved slowly forward, 'young Walter Munro of Eastern Farne at their head equipped in a sralet Cloak and riding a white steed'. This was Ross's son.

Captain Matheson continues: "Whenever The Kintail men noticed him they considered him to be one of the Commissioners and then Malcolm MacRae and Donald Derg MacLennan from Morvich in Kintail scrambled down through a rough burn where they took good aim and both let go the contents of their muskets, by which lovely young Walter of Farne fell mortally wounded."

All our evidence suggests that Walter's wound was in the lower body. The Gairloch anthologist John Mackenzie, who thought it happened at Glenshiel in 1719, wrote: *Thòisich an cath eadar iad fein 's na Spàintich, agus cha b'fhada gus an deach Bhàtar a leòn, chuir peileir canoin a' chas deth.* "The battle began between them and the Spaniards, and it wasn't long before Walter was wounded, a cannonball took his leg off."

Ross's men retreated in horror, while Murchison and his party poured down a deadly fire on them.

*Dol sìos thro Mhonadh Afaraig
A leag sibh Baltair Gaolach,
'S gur lìonmhor gunna snaip a bh' ann
Dhan cur a-mach ri aonach.*

("Going down through Affric moorland / You felled Beloved Walter, / And many triggered guns were there / That drove them off to the hills.")

Pulling off their shoes, the men of the west now rushed down sword in hand. Easter Fearn was taken prisoner and brought to Murchison, who demanded the document commissioning him as factor.

*Nuair chunna sibh nach b' urrainn duibh
Na giullain a bh' aig Dòmhnall,
Gun tug sibh an comisean da
A fhuair sibh 'ghibht bho Dheòrsa!*

("When you saw you were no match / For those young lads of Donald's, / You gave him the commission / Which you had in gift from King George!") Murchison then made him 'swear fealty on his bare knees that he would not further act as Factor nor give him nor any other person acting in behalf of Seaforth any trouble or molestation after this being promised by William Munro or Ross of Eastern Fearn'.

Ross was now free to go, but with his son seriously wounded and many of his men fleeing to safety, he begged Murchison to provide an escort that might allow him to catch up with them. "To this request," says Captain Matheson, "the Noble Colonel acceded with his wonted generosity."

They made Walter a litter out of birch poles tied together with withies made of birch twigs, covered with broom and heather. Walter was gently placed on his scented bed, and, led by Murdoch MacRae from Kintail, the party began its journey down the glen.

As they walked, the Redcoats began to discuss in English the likelihood of being waylaid by their comrades, upon which they would turn on their escort 'and kill and slaughter them'. What they didn't know was that Murdoch MacRae understood English. So when they got down to Knockfin in the heights of Strathglass, the low ground before them, MacRae gave orders for the escort to return to Kintail, leaving Ross's party to struggle on by itself. And Walter died of his wounds.

*Dol sìos thro Ghleann Shrath Ghlais dhuibh
Cha deach sibh ceart 'nur meanmna
Dar thug sibh màl a' Mharcais libh*

Air cupall each 's air carbad.

(“Moving down through Glen Strathglass / You didn’t get your spirits back / By bringing home the rent of the Marquis / On a pair of horses and a bier.”)

In my next article I’ll explain the origins of the verses I have quoted, and say more about the hapless Walter of the scarlet cloak and the white steed, who seems to have become a symbol of all that the *Siarraich* loathed about the *Searraich*.

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