

## Make way for Seaforth's rent!

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I described the battle of Àth nam Muileach at the head of Loch Affric, which took place on 2 October 1721. Col. Donald Murchison, factor of the estate of the exiled Jacobite Marquis of Seaforth, defeated a force of Government troops led by William Ross of Easter Fearn, whose purpose was to destroy Murchison's ability to control the estate with his band of sixty men and transmit its rents to the exiled Marquis.

According to an account by Captain Alexander Matheson of Dornie preserved in Edinburgh University Library, Ross's son Walter was wounded while leading the troops wearing a scarlet cloak and riding a white horse. He was carried down Glen Affric in a litter made of birch, but died at Knockfin in Strathglass shortly after an escort chivalrously provided by Murchison had turned back for home.

A court of enquiry held the following month heard the following evidence: "John Chisholme, of Knockfinn, ag'd fifty or thereby, being deeply sworn, depons that he saw the corps of Walter Ross, lawful son to William Ross, of Easter Fearn, brought to Wester Knockfinn, at least there, and the lead with which, as he beleiv'd, the said Walter Ross was murder'd taken out of his bodie."

As Ross and his men passed through Beaully with Walter's corpse on its bier, dragged along by two horses, an old MacLennan woman confronted the procession, says Captain Matheson, and shouted sarcastically: "Let pass the Earl of Seaforth's rent thou low mob."

It was what would nowadays be called a defining moment. No matter how they differ on points of detail, all sources for the battle mention it in one way or another, and it gave rise to an astonishing outpouring of verse. Captain Matheson says: "She then chanted out a gaelic effusion or rapsody she composed to the occasion." And he gives the song as preserved by oral tradition in Kintail. (I quoted three verses of it in my last article.)

Likewise, in his 'Domestic Annals of Scotland' (1859–61), Robert Chambers cited an account by F. Macdonald, Druidag Lodge, Lochalsh. "Mr Macdonald ends by quoting two or three stanzas of a Gaelic poem composed by an old woman at Beaully, as they were passing with the dead body." Unfortunately Chambers, not being a Gaelic speaker, didn't see fit to pass on these stanzas to his readers.

In a paper on Murchison read in 1893 to the Gaelic Society of Inverness, William Mackay offered a different version of the song, which he called a ballad, saying: "It is said to have been the work of a Beaully woman, who witnessed the retreat of the Factors and the burial of Walter Ross."

And going back to 1844, in his book 'An t-Aosdàna' John Mackenzie from Gairloch gave a version of the tradition in Gaelic. I translate. "The Munros then fled, carrying Walter with them on a litter (*cràgh-leabaidh*). As they were going through Beaully (*Baile-nam-Manach*) a big crowd of the people of the district came and stood before them on the highway, watching them with astonishment. There was an old woman amongst the crowd who perceived how things stood and she cried at the top of her voice in mockery, *Réitichibh an rathad do mhàl Mhic-Coinnich!* 'Make way for Seaforth's rent!'"

Mackenzie says nothing of the woman making any sort of poem, but adds: "The descendants of this old woman received land free of rent for many generations from Seaforth's family for those words." Captain Matheson says, a little more credibly perhaps: "After Seaforth being restored to his estates he used to give the old woman MacLennan a boll of meal yearly for her loyalty to his cause."

The idea of referring to the dead youth – 'lovely young Walter of Farne', as Captain Matheson called him – as 'the Earl of Seaforth's rent' was a remarkably vicious one, but that is precisely the tone of the poetry. As I said last time, it's as if the hapless Walter had become a symbol of all that the *Siarach*, the folk of Wester and Mid Ross, loathed about the *Searach*, the folk of Easter Ross and the Black Isle. Beaully and Dingwall were where they met; they differed in religion, in politics, in dialect, in lifestyle, and to some extent at this period in language, clothing and diet as well.

I find the first verse of Captain Matheson's version of the poem hard to understand. He writes it like this:

*Da rent da rent da rothond  
Da rent da rothudh rothrum  
Dar shaoil lib dh'oll ah sasuin  
Theid a thasgaidh anns a' Mhanachuinn.*

I can make better sense of it by spelling it like this:

*Dà rent, dà rent, dà roghainn,  
Dà rent dan rothadh romhainn —  
Dar shaoil libh dhol a Shasainn  
Théid a thasgaidh anns a' Mhanachainn!*

(“Two rents, two rents, two choices, / Two rents swathed before us — / When you thought he'd be off to England / He'll be getting buried in Beaulieu!”) The two rents, the two choices, would be the real rent paid to Seaforth and the rent of death paid to those who oppose him. *Da(n) rothadh* is a deliberate pun, I think, as it can mean both ‘swathed’, as a corpse in its shroud, or ‘wheeled’, as a hearse drawn through the streets, although frankly I doubt if there were many wheeled vehicles in Beaulieu in 1721 – Walter’s bier was more likely to be a slipe, dragged Indian-style along the ground.

What interests me most of all is the reference to England. It sounds as if young Walter was supposed to be going to England – to Oxford or Cambridge? To a commission in the army? Alexander Ross’s ‘History of the Clan Ross’ merely tells us that he was third son of William, sixth laird of Easter Fearn, that his eldest brother Alexander eventually succeeded his father as seventh laird and became Commissary Clerk for the County of Ross, and that his other brother Edward became a merchant in Inverness.

The MacLennan woman intended a double meaning here as well, I think, because if the rent brought in by William Ross had been of money and not of death, she means that it would have ended up in England, which I suppose is why she uses the English word ‘rent’. This is one of the things I meant by differing views on politics. Those who were for Seaforth were against the Union of 1707. The banner raised by Seaforth and the other Jacobites on 6 September 1715 had been emblazoned with the thistle, the arms of Scotland and the words: “No Union”.

However, I have some other evidence about Walter Ross going to England. It comes in a much larger satirical composition about him which I will be introducing next time, a *crochanachd* (that is, consisting of verse alternating with prose).

*Dal a reu tu Shasunn  
Ghabhail beachd air Rìgh Deòrsa  
Bhiu do shaighdearan mar riut,  
A rì! cha b' ainid an còmhlàn  
Le'n gunnaibh 's le'n dagaibh  
'S le 'n claidhe duilleach an òrdu,  
Bhiu am màileadan craicinn  
Lum-lan peasair a's ponair  
'S iad 'g ith gun stad!*

The spelling, which is John Mackenzie’s, is a little peculiar because it is in deliberate mockery of Easter Ross Gaelic. Captain Matheson offers this very helpful translation: “When you would march into England / For to see King George there / Thy soldiers would follow thee, / They were a gallant train band / With their guns and their pistols / And hilted swords in good order, / With their Wallets made of skins / Filled with pease and beans / And eating without halt!”

I have two comments about this. One is that a *claidhe duilleach* is I think a ‘sheathed sword’, not a hilted one. The other is about the words *cha b' ainid an còmhlàn*, literally ‘not vexing was the company’, which Captain Matheson gives as ‘They were a gallant train band’. A train-band, according to Chambers’ dictionary (the same Chambers!), was a band of citizens trained to bear arms, and I think the Captain, as a professional in such matters, was making a well-informed guess as to Walter’s status – that he was an ensign in the Ross-shire

militia, or something of the kind.

In an acutely status-conscious age, I'm certain that the third son of William Ross of Easter Fearn regarded himself as every bit the equal of the third son of any other laird – MacKenzie of Gairloch, say – and distinctly superior to a man like Murchison who was the eldest son of a mere tacksman, and therefore really quite vulgar. The men of the west, who were just as status-conscious but had a different set of values, would have seen it otherwise. Pedigree or no, a man who was not a warrior's son but a farmer's just didn't count, while supporting the Elector of Hanover against a Stuart put you beneath contempt.

How, then, are we to understand young Walter's alleged visit to England with his soldiers? It reminds me of Captain Matheson's statement that at Edinburgh University Donald Murchison had got a grounding in military tactics as well as a classical education. I suspect that Walter had spent a term or two at Oxford or Cambridge; that he had been sent there at anything from 14 to 16 years of age; that he was accompanied by a little troop of family retainers (and their wives) to look after him; and that all of them (except the wives) were dignified for the purpose by some sort of military status. All this was, I believe, the fashion of the times, if you could afford it.

Here now is the prose that follows that bit of verse: *Ochan! e chuine! 's ann aca féin a bhiu i na tudanan a's na cruachan. – Bhiodh gràineanan de'n pheasair gheal aca bhiu anns a' ghara-lios bhiu iad a' spiolu deiru an t-Sàmhrù a's toiseach an Fhoghair gus am biu a pheasair eile abaich, a chuine!*

Captain Matheson's translation captures the flavour of it beautifully. "Alas man! It is them that would have the large and small stacks. They would have grains of White pease. Yes they would have planted in the gardins white pease that they would be husking in the latter end of summer and in the beginning of harvest untill the other pease would get ripe O man!"

In the ceilidh-houses of Kintail, where the diet was meat, milk and a little oats and barley, this would have had them rolling in the aisles. Especially if they picked up the *double entendre* on *tudanan* – 'farts' as well as 'small stacks', immediately after the reference to eating beans!

All our sources agree that Walter was buried in Beaulieu. As Captain Matheson puts it: "This young Walter died of his wounds and a bloody grave for him in the Beaulieu Cathedral was the only print of the abortive attempt of William Munro of Eastern Farnie to take the Seaforth Estates within the scope of the Law of King George."

Finally, here are a few more verses of Captain Matheson's version of the MacLennan woman's 'effusion or rapsody':

*'S a Dhòmhnaiill chridhe thapaidh  
Chuireadh feum air feachd fon éideadh,  
Gun guidhinn ceum gu tapadh dhuit,  
Bhon b' ait leam fhìn mar dh' éirich.*

("And O brave-hearted Donald / Who'd put an armed band to good use, / May I wish you a step to bravery, / Since I'm delighted at what's happened.")

*Gun deach Fear Feàrna mhaslachdainn  
'S gun deach a mhac a reubadh,  
'S chaidh luchd nan còta daithte sin  
A chasaid a Dhùn Éideann!*

("The Laird of Fearn was disgraced / And his son was mangled, / And those men with coloured coats / Went to Edinburgh to complain!")

*Gur olc a chinnich comhairle  
A dh'fhàg an gnothach cearbach –  
Fear Feàrna bhith 'na chaithean oirbh  
'S gun deach a mhac a mharbhadh.*

("An unfortunate plan emerged / Which left the mission a disaster – / The Laird of Fearn to

be your captain, / Resulting in his son being killed.”)

*Nuair chunna na fir chas-luath sin  
Gun ghabh iad eagal 's gun sgaoil iad  
'S gun d'fhàg sibh anns a' ghreadan sin  
Am fear nach b' fhaide saoghal.*

(“When those swift-footed men saw it / They took fright and scattered, / And you left in that  
mêlée / The young man no longer living.”)

**WHFP 24 August 2001**