

The Robin Hood of the North

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IT'S some time now since I introduced Carmichael-Watson MS 123 in Edinburgh University Library. This is a typescript of some writings by Captain Alexander Matheson of Dornie in Kintail about events in the 1720s when the Jacobite colonel Donald Murchison, like a latter-day Robin Hood with sixty merry men, was defending the Seaforth Estates against the encroachments of Munros, Rosses and the Hanoverian government.

His Richard the Lionheart was Uilleam Dubh, the young marquis of Seaforth, not on a crusade in the Holy Land but intriguing with the rest of the Jacobite exiles, funded by the rents which Murchison was gathering and sending on to him in Spain or Paris.

Seaforth's estate had been forfeited by Act of Parliament in 1720. It was in that year that the Forfeited Estates Commissioners in Edinburgh made the first of their 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 – and a pitched battle in which Murchison routed the harassers on the banks of the Conon.

The second attempt, in 1721, involved a more careful strategy. First 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 the clear civilian leadership of William Ross of Easter Fearn, formal military involvement, and a strike against Murchison's strongholds of Kintail and Lochalsh. It was this strike that came to grief at Àth nam Muileach in Glen Affric on 2 October 1721, leading to the death of Ross's son Walter and the amazing gush of propaganda which I have been examining in my last five articles.

The Commissioners had learnt their lesson. The third attempt, in August 1722, was entirely military. The leader was to be Captain John MacNeil. Probably a Carskey MacNeil from Kintyre and therefore a Campbell in all but name, I would guess. No time was to be wasted uplifting rent. Kintail and Lochalsh must be hit, and hit hard, not by the mountainous southern route through Glen Affric that William Ross had taken, but by the northerly one followed today by the railway. "Taking their route through Strathchonnan considering it the safest route," wrote Captain Matheson, "marching on through Strathconan and Strath Bran, they came into the Heights of Lochcarron."

The surprise element worked. This time Murchison had no time to gather reinforcements. He and his 'gallant band' posted themselves on Mam Attadale, the hills between Lochalsh and Lochcarron.

When Murchison got information that MacNeil and his troops were climbing towards Mam Attadale from the bank of the River Carron, 'he posted his men in ambush at the skirts of the Gray woods or Burch trees growing on the Lochcarron side of the Hill of Attadale through which the invaders would have to pass'. His two best marksmen, Donald Dearg MacLennan and Malcolm MacRae from Morvich, who had prematurely ended the career of Walter Ross the year before, hid in the trunk of an old tree.

With a man at the reins of his horse, MacNeil led his men in military order towards the birch thicket. A volley of musketry rang out. Several soldiers were killed. MacLennan had fired at the man leading MacNeil's horse; the ball went through his hand and cut the reins. MacRae's target was MacNeil himself, and he fractured his arm.

MacNeil, in great pain, brought his men back down the hill, crossed the Carron and made camp in the Kirkton of Lochcarron. Throughout the night Murchison and his men kindled big fires on the hills above and gathered herds of black cattle round them. From down in the glen this gave the impression of large numbers and constant movement. MacNeil calculated that he was opposing an army of up to two hundred men rather than the sixty or so who were actually there.

In the morning, Murchison sent down Colin MacKenzie of Kennacraig and John Og Matheson from Lochalsh, 'two men of Enderdion', for a parley. "What is your errand?" says MacNeil.

"To treat with you upon terms about your journey to take possession of the forfeited estates."

MacNeil assured them that he didn't propose to make any further attempts to go forward. Remembering his experience the previous day, he promised to retrace his steps provided the two men would escort him through the woods in the Heights of Lochcarron until they got into the open country to the east. Then he offered them breakfast.

Far up on the hill and still nervous about his inferiority in numbers, Murchison watched the redcoats strike camp and begin their march up Strathcarron, led by MacKenzie and Matheson. He brought his men quickly round the back of the hills to the high ground above Conness (at Allt a' Chonais between Achnashellach and Achnasheen in the Heights of Lochcarron) where they could see the column winding its way uphill towards them. When the soldiers had cleared the woods, Murchison watched his two friends shaking hands with MacNeil and parting on good terms.

So ended the last of the Commissioners' three attempts to take possession of the Seaforth estate. But Captain Matheson goes on to tell some anecdotes about our two marksmen from Morvich. They

are, obviously, the Little John and Will Scarlet of the show. On their way home from Conness they rest in Glen Luinge. Noticing some butter flowers growing in a meadow on the opposite side of the river, MacLennan says, "Try if you can bring one down of the butter flowers."

MacRae's musket-ball cuts the top of the flower. Then MacLennan does the same with the stalk.

In due course MacLennan's son, also Donald, studies for the church. The parish of Lochalsh becomes vacant, and Dòmhnall Dearg decides to do what he can to have him appointed to it. (These are the bad old days of patronage.) Dòmhnall Dearg goes to see Kenneth MacKenzie, the new Earl of Seaforth, who tells him that the decision has been made, and that the presentee is to be a Murdo MacIver from Lewis. "Was it a MacIver from the Lewis," says Dòmhnall Dearg, drawing himself up to his full height, "that killed young Fearn in Affaric?"

Seaforth replies with another question. "Was it with spilling blood you came to place your son in holy orders?"

Despite his father's efforts on his behalf, the Rev. Donald MacLennan did well. He was ordained minister of his native parish of Kintail in 1774 and died in 1780.

But to return, finally, to 'the Robin Hood of the North'. After MacNeil's failure Col. Murchison was left in peace to raise Seaforth's rents and transmit them to him as he saw fit, while the government turned its attention to providing what Easter Fearn and MacNeil had so signally lacked. Roads.

General Wade had much to say in dispatches about Murchison's movements. In one he tells how the bold colonel arrives in Edinburgh with a band of armed men on his way to Leith to take ship for France, bearing with him his master's rents. They parade openly up the High Street before putting up in an inn for the night. The magistrates, realising they have an outlaw on their patch, order out the city guard to arrest him.

The innkeeper gets word that the guard are on their way, and tells Murchison that he is in danger. Murchison orders him to bar the door, then line the passage of the lobby with bottles of brandy, rum and whisky and fill up as many glasses, bowls and decanters as he can and leave them in every corner of the house.

The guards arrive and demand instant admittance in the King's name. "When this was done," concludes Captain Matheson, "the soldiers finding the liquor in such a profusion they quaffed it off so luxuriously that it stunded their faculties and Colonel Donald Murchison made his escape by a back door and got safely aboard of a vessel which was lying in Leith Roads on her way to France where he arrived safe with the Seaforth Rents."

Then the Colonel takes to travelling as a beggar. He has a narrow escape once 'in a house in the South' when a man says to his friend, "Let us try the beggar's wallet." Fortunately the friend dissuades him. Matheson remarks: "It would seem he was protected in his ways by Providence."

In 1724 he is in a country inn in England on the way to Dover, dressed as a beggar. Who arrives but the Duke of Argyll – *Iain Mór nan Cath*, no less, the general who stopped the Jacobites in their tracks at Sheriffmuir in '15. After dinner the Duke asks if there are any other guests. "Only a mendicant, your Grace, sitting at the kitchen fireside," replies the landlady. Then she gossips that 'his manners and expressions betrayed him to be more than his present capacity of life'.

The Duke orders him into his presence. "If I am not mistaken," he says slowly, staring at the squint-eyed beggar, "you are Colonel Donald Murchison who commanded Seaforth's clans at the battle of Sheriffmuir and who routed the left wing of my army!"

Murchison throws himself at his mercy. "You are the most faithful subject I know in all Scotland," says Iain Mór, "and I cannot conceive how you could perform such deeds with the few retinue of fellows I am told you have."

"I have wrought all for the love I have borne to Seaforth and King James. It is true that I have only my sixty trusty followers, with which I have performed these deeds in defending my country. In proof to your Lordship, here is a list of the men's names which I have on a parchment next my skin."

It sounds to me like an act of betrayal, but clearly Murchison is keen to stress that his 'army' is a small one. If he is trying to embarrass the Duke, it works. "My faithful brave servant, it would be a pity to take the like of you in charge."

They spend the night 'over their cups'. Next day the Duke brings Murchison to Dover in his carriage, assuring him he will plead with King George on Seaforth's behalf.

When Murchison reaches France 'he found the Earl of Seaforth labouring in a garden for his own and Lady's support'. Seaforth embraces him with joy, and no wonder! He is bringing him money.

The Duke has behaved with dignity, but Murchison's cover is blown. From now on he is watched by spies and 'wanted' notices are posted at the ports. He is arrested at sea on his way back from France and placed in the Tower of London.

What happens next explains the mystery of how Murchison fell out so badly with Seaforth that he ended up being satirised in the song 'Moladh Chabair Féidh'. King George comes to see him in the Tower early in 1725 and promises that if he will be as faithful to him as to his chief, he will release him and see that he gets a third of the Seaforth estate for himself. He is duly set free and goes

back to Ross-shire.

Meanwhile, seeing the new roads advancing north, the MacKenzie grandees (Tarbat, Cromarty and Coul) are at Inverness negotiating with Marshall Wade. If they are discharged from the rents taken away by Murchison, they say, they will pay rent in future to King George and surrender their weapons. In return Wade undertakes to try and get a pardon for themselves and Seaforth in the next session of parliament.

Murchison gets back to Brahan in the middle of all this and spirits away all the weapons that are of use. The grandees arrive with Wade and a troop of dragoons and ceremonially hand over the rest. Then the Forfeited Estates Commissioners put up the Seaforth Estates for sale and, thanks to the King's promise, Murchison is able to buy them 'so that they virtually became his own', as Matheson puts it, meaning that he holds the title deeds but can never be recognised as proprietor.

In 1726 Seaforth gets his pardon and comes home to Brahan. He appoints Colin MacKenzie of Kennacraig and a Dr MacKenzie as factors. Now living at Nostie, Murchison waits to see what 'third of the estate' he is going to be given for his services – Lochalsh itself, perhaps, or Lochcarron? Nothing happens, so he goes to see Seaforth. "Donald, would not less lands by far have satisfied you than that? I will give you the farm of Bundaloch in Kintail on which you were born."

"I thought that your Lordship could never grudge me what his Majesty has granted me after all the toils, hardships, intrigues and narrow escapes with my life I have had in your cause."

This the Earl passes over in silent contempt. The interview finished, Seaforth immediately dispatches Kennacraig to Nostie where he breaks open the Colonel's charter chest and extracts the title deeds.

When Murchison returns home and finds what has happened he turns round immediately in pursuit. "The Colonel's indignation and agitation were so extreme," says Matheson, "that he bursted a blood vessel when he arrived on the Banks of the River Connan. And went over to the house of his old friend and relative the widow of Tuach of Logerach."

Murchison is a dying man. Seaforth comes to his bedside at Logerach and says, "Colonel Murchison, if I have done you any earthly injury I hope you will forgive me."

"God may forgive you but I will not."

Seaforth tries again. "Would you like to be buried in my family's tomb?"

"She who gave me a bed to die in will also give me a grave to lie in."

Donald Murchison, our 'Robin Hood of the North', died in March 1727, and is buried on the banks of the Conon.

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