

Her Heart's Youthful Prize

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

For my 400th article in this series I'd like to revisit the story behind one of our most famous songs, 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg'.

Earlier this year I published the song along with some notes and a translation ('My Heart's Youthful Prize') in my book 'An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse' (Birlinn, £16.99). I was pretty sceptical about the usual story behind it – that it was made by Christiana Fergusson from Contin in Ross-shire for her husband William Chisholm of Innis nan Ceann in Strathglass, who was killed carrying the Chisholm banner at Culloden.

I didn't say outright in 'An Lasair' that I didn't believe the story, because there is a nineteenth-century monument in Strathglass inscribed "W. C. / 1746 / Mo Run Geal Og", the story is carved deep into tourist literature, and the Strathglass folk are very proud of their hero. (Having been ruthlessly cleared by their own clan chief, they haven't much else to be proud about.)

I had various reasons for being sceptical. When the song was first published in 1804 it was stated to have been made by a lady in Strathglass for her husband Gillies MacBean. MacBean is a well-known hero of Culloden, but he was a Strathnairn man as far as I know.

Then when it was re-published in 1806 the 'lady in Strathglass' was kept in but the mention of MacBean was dropped. That, as I now realise, was for good reason.

When it was published again in 1821 it was claimed to have been made for Rob Roy MacGillivray, tacksman of Strathglass, by his wife. I began to feel this must be a mistake for Capt. Robert MacGillivray of Dalziel in the parish of Petty, who is said to have killed seven redcoats at Culloden with the tram of a peat-cart. 'Strathglass', I thought, would be a mistake for 'Dunmaglass', the designation of the MacGillivray chief.

In 1841 John Mackenzie, a native of Gairloch in Ross-shire, published in his famous book 'Sàr Obair nam Bàrd' what came to be accepted as the definitive version. The song was made, he said, by Christiana Fergusson, daughter of a blacksmith from Contin in Ross-shire whose speciality was making dirks and other weapons. The man she married was William Chisholm of Innis nan Ceann in Strathglass, a near relative of the chief. William, he said, carried the Chisholm banner and died a hero, standing in a barn door hewing down all within reach until in the end he took seven bullets in the back from some Englishmen who had climbed on top of the barn.

Seven bullets, seven redcoats. Barns, peat-carts. I began to think I had enough evidence to construct a theory that the song was made for Robert MacGillivray and not for William Chisholm at all. It wasn't surprising, I thought, if Ross-shire tradition wanted to claim it for itself. I couldn't find a trace of either William Chisholm or Innis nan Ceann in authentic Chisholm histories or Strathglass records. On the contrary, Alexander Mackenzie's definitive history of the Chisholms (published 1891) states clearly that the clan banner was carried at Culloden by John Macdonald, *Iain na Brataich*, who survived long after the '45 and eventually emigrated to Canada.

William Chisholm is a 'cult' figure whose story never lost in the telling – a little book of Strathglass place-names published in 1968 declares that he killed sixteen men! Did he ever exist?

Well, imagine my surprise last week when I came across a little feature headed 'Mo Run Geal Og' on the last page of vol. 3 of the 'Celtic Monthly', published in 1895. It was by Angus Mackintosh, Brookman's Park, Herts. He starts by referring to that 'rough stone slab', which, as he points out, had been erected a few years before by a local man and a poet, the late Mr Alexander Fraser, Mauld, to commemorate an 'incident' of the '45. Then he says: "The incident, as I heard it years ago, I give in the following lines." And he launches into seventeen remarkable quatrains of English verse, beginning:

*"Hark! I hear the pibroch, William,
'Tis the 'Gathering' of the clan:
Up, and with your chief and clansmen
To Culloden like a man.*

*“It beseems you ill to linger,
Or the coward’s part to play,
When the loyal and the dauntless
Are preparing for the fray;*

*“When from distant rugged Affric,
And Mulardich high and cold,
Kerrow, Comar, and green Cannich,
Come your kinsmen strong and bold;*

*“While from yonder smoke-stained rafter
Hangs a claymore keen and sure,
That your loyal father yielded
On the field of Sheriffmuir.*

*“Here’s a breakfast that befits you,
'Tis the craven hearted’s fare:
Stronger food is for the dauntless
That in conflict foemen dare:*

*“That from out the storm of battle,
Flashing steel, and darting fire,
Return victors, or like heroes
On the battlefield expire.”*

*Thus his spouse with Spartan spirit
Spoke to William, as she laid
On the board a dish of gruel
Fited for an invalid.*

No wonder Mackintosh took care to dignify in verse the tradition he had heard. So far he is suggesting that William Chisholm of Innis nan Ceann, whose father had fought at Sheriffmuir in 1715, was a coward. And that Christiana Fergusson was a nagging wife! He goes on:

*William felt the sting, but neither
Answered her by look nor word,
But in silence rose and buckled
On his father’s trusty sword.*

*And he hastened down the valley
With a step both swift and sure,
Till he overtook his clansmen
Marching to Culloden Moor.*

This seems to confirm the cowardice accusation – William had let the Chisholms march off without him. Thus does the hero of ‘Mo Run Geal Òg’ stomp out of the house without so much as a backward look.

*'Tis not mine to tell the story
Of Culloden’s fatal day:
Of the clansmen that were scattered
Or that perished in the fray:*

*But when on the belching cannon
Rushed Prince Charlie’s kilted van,
William was amongst the foremost*

Of the dauntless Chisholm clan.

*There, beside his gallant chieftain,
Striking fiercely, striking well,
'Mid the clash of sword and musket
Like a hero fought, and fell.*

There's no mention of carrying the banner, nor of a last stand at a barn door. These must have been tacked on (in good faith?) by John Mackenzie from stories of Iain na Brataich, MacGillivray of Petty, and Gillies MacBean.

*When the tidings of the battle
Up the winding Glass were borne,
Few in sheiling, cot, or castle
But had cause that day to mourn,*

*But amongst them none more keenly
Felt the sharp and cruel blow,
Than the wife who drove her husband
By her taunts to meet the foe.*

*With remorse her heart was stricken,
As the lightning strikes the oak,
And from out its depths of anguish
Welled the song 'Mo run geal og'.*

*Sweet and touching in its pathos
Is that sorrow-laden song,
That depicts the form and features
Of the gentle and the strong:*

*Of the hero, and the husband
She shall never see again
Till the trenches of Culloden
Open, and give up their slain.*

There's nothing else in Mackintosh's article except his name and address. But what an indignant response it attracted from Colin Chisholm, a well-known stalwart of the Gaelic Society of Inverness, a couple of issues later! "SIR — Imagine my surprise at Mr Angus Mackintosh's version of the story of the far-famed and brave William Chisholm . . ."

Colin Chisholm's defence of the *status quo* is, to me, less than convincing. "Evidently Mr Angus Mackintosh is not aware that William Chisholm was the standard-bearer for the Clan Chisholm at Culloden," he says, but his way of supporting this is simply to repeat John Mackenzie's words at great length, saying by way of introduction: "Let me quote what an independent writer of eminence (in his line) said of *Fear-Innis-nan-ceann* and his most amiable and talented spouse, Christina Fergusson."

Now Gaelic scholars know well that everything John Mackenzie wrote ain't gospel. The fact that 'Sàr Obair' went through seven editions (including an American one), even changing the Gaelic words that people sang to their songs, shows that it was popular and influential, not that it was accurate.

Chisholm then says: "I have quoted Mr McKenzie as an independent authority only, but I am prepared (if need be) to give the names of four men and two women who remembered the stirring incidents of the '45 and '46."

He means that they 'remembered' them at second hand, of course, since he is writing in 1896. Note that he doesn't say what, if anything, these people knew about William Chisholm. His next statement is more interesting. "For the first twenty years of my life I lived next door to the son of one of the men who accompanied William Chisholm when he went to Contin to marry Miss Christina Fergusson, the armourer's daughter. In relating his

father's account of the reception the party had and the wedding festivities, it seemed to me the Fergussons were in easy circumstances."

I take three things from this. One, this is absolute proof that William Chisholm existed. Two, Colin Chisholm fails to cite this neighbour as evidence for what happened in 1746, presumably because William was *not* the standard-bearer and what happened to him at Culloden was unknown. Three, I get the distinct impression that Christiana – or Christina, as he prefers to call her – had married beneath herself. And that leads me to a possible explanation of why William Chisholm does not figure in Chisholm histories or Strathglass records. Perhaps, far from being a relative of the chief, he had no status, no trade, no land. In other words, he was a cotter. And cotters didn't go to battle. They were not warriors but *bodaich*. Peasants. Serfs.

Colin Chisholm finishes politely enough: "Let me beg to assure the poet, Mr Angus Mackintosh, that it is far from my thoughts to find fault with him for having written an able comment on erroneous information. I remain, faithfully yours . . ."

Personally I feel that Angus Mackintosh's evidence has the ring of truth about it (indeed he went to enormous trouble to express it diplomatically). Christiana (or Christina) marries unwisely. Perhaps she's no great looker and takes what she can get. Her family does its best. They put on a good show at the wedding.

William is a disappointment. Perhaps his father's adventure in 1715 destroyed the family fortunes. Christiana nags him off to Culloden. He is never seen again. Hoping he died a hero, she pours out her heart for the man she never really had, except perhaps at that wedding in Contin when everyone said how beautiful she was.

She doesn't name William in the song. Nor Strathglass. Perhaps the place has become loathsome to her. But she *does* mention places in Skye, where she seems to have gone to get away from Cumberland's orgy of plunder and rape. They'll believe her there, whatever she says.

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