

## Robert Mac Iain Ghiorr from Mull

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last two articles I gave an account of a seaborne cattle-lifter from Ardnamurchan called Archibald MacDonald, better known as *Mac Iain Ghiorr*, who lived from about 1600 to 1650, and whose galley had one side black and one side white.

Thanks to a reader in Lochcarron, Miss Mina Stewart, I now have another story to tell. Again it will take two articles, and again it seems to be about Mac Iain Ghiorr – but, as I said last time, now you see him, now you don't . . .

Miss Stewart begins by explaining how as a schoolgirl around 1938 she was given a project by her Gaelic teacher to make a collection of local place-names. This she did during the Easter holidays. Her mother suggested that they visit her relatives at Stromecarronach, the township between Slumbay and North Strome where *her* mother, Miss Stewart's maternal grandmother, was born.

Miss Stewart's grandmother used to say that she remembered sixty-two people living at Stronecarronach. Sadly "the fever", whether typhoid or typhus, had decimated the population around 1900. About 1923 the proprietor, Mr Murray, sold the land to the Forestry Commission, with the exception of that part crofted by Miss Stewart's relatives – they refused to be evicted, and the Land Court eventually found in their favour.

There were now only two houses there – Miss Stewart's grandmother's, and one belonging to "Dòmhnall Denny", Donald Mackenzie. Mina went to him to ask about place-names, and in connection with *Lag nan Còpag* in Kishorn, which I suppose means "the Hollow of the Dockens", he told her this story, which she thinks is probably not now remembered by anyone else. It's fascinating how it relates to what we already know about Mac Iain Ghiorr.

Miss Stewart wrote it down, heading it: "Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr a Muile." It begins: *Bha uachdaran Loch Carain air turas uair, ag coimhead air uachdaran Mhuile, ach bha feagal air tilleadh air ais, oir bha fios aige gum b' àill le na Sgitheanaich a mharbhadh.* ("The laird of Lochcarron was once away visiting the laird of Mull, but he was afraid to come back because he knew the Skyemen would like to kill him.")

The question arises straight away, who exactly are the lairds of Lochcarron and Mull? I believe the former was Kenneth, first lord MacKenzie of Kintail, father of the first earl of Seaforth, because I have delved into the "History of the Clan Mackenzie" by Alexander Mackenzie (whom I will refer to from now on as Clach, short for Clachnacuddin, the name by which he was universally known in Inverness).

Clach tells us that around 1600 a confederacy of MacDonalds was raised against Kenneth by his arch-rival for power in the area, Angus MacDonald, younger of Glengarry, whose father still had land in Lochcarron and Lochalsh. He says: "This soon came to Mackenzie's knowledge, who was at the time residing in Islandonain Castle; and fearing the consequences of such a powerful combination against him, he went privately to Mull by sea to consult his brother-in-law, Maclean of Duart."

That establishes the identity of both chiefs pretty clearly, I think, but the dates don't make a very good fit with those of Gilleasbaig Mac Iain Ghiorr, for (as we will see) the story presents Raibeart Mac Iain Ghiorr in the full of manhood, but takes place about 1600. Perhaps Dòmhnall Denny's story is about the man we know as Gilleasbaig Mac Iain Ghiorr but he was born about 1580? Perhaps it's not about him but an elder brother?

Anyway, we're going to have to leave Dòmhnall Denny's tale aside for a while and concentrate on what Clach has to tell us, because a lot of exciting things happened while the lord of Kintail was away in Mull. Grasping his opportunity, Angus MacDonald gathered a fleet of galleys in Loch Hourn, sailed through the kyles at dead of night, landed at Lochcarron, massacred all the MacKenzies he could find, rounded up the cattle, drove them to the boats at Slumbay, slaughtered them, and loaded the carcasses on to his boats.

But of course the alarm went around. The Kintail men brought from Inverinate a newly-built twelve-oared galley belonging to Gille Crìost mac Dhonnchaidh which had never been to sea. They spent the evening at Eilean Donnain making preparations for a fight, superintended by Kenneth's wife. She gave them lead and powder with her own hands, says Clach, and two small pieces of brass ordnance. "She ordered Duncan MacGhillechrist, a

powerful handsome fellow, to take command of the galley in his father's absence, and in eloquent terms charged them all with the honour of her house and her own protection . . .

"She mounted the castle walls, and stood there encouraging them until, by the darkness of the night, she could no longer see them."

So we have a single boat manned by Kintail men sailing west through Loch Alsh to intercept a heavily-laden MacDonald fleet sailing south and east through the Kyle of Lochalsh. A Lochalsh boat appears to tell the MacRaes of the enemy's arrival at Kyleakin. It's a calm moonlight night with occasional showers of snow. The tide has begun to flow, and they reckon that the MacDonalds will await the turn of the tide before trying to get through Kyle Rhea.

Putting seaweed in the rowlocks to deaden the sound of their oars, the MacRaes press on, hugging the shore. They see a small boat being rowed hard in their direction. Assuming it has been sent on to test the passage at Kyle Rhea, they feather their oars, hold their breath and let it pass.

In due course they come in sight of the Cailleach, the rock that marks the halfway point between the two kyles. It's covered in snow. Then they spot a huge galley – Angus MacDonald's, well ahead of the rest of the fleet. Three times they hear Angus cry out: *Có tha siud?* "Who goes there?"

His third shout is drowned by the roar of the Kintail men's cannon. It disables his galley and throws it on to the Cailleach. The MacDonalds think they have been driven ashore and run towards the bow to escape. This capsizes the ship and it fills with water. Seeing a long stretch of sea between themselves and the shore the MacDonalds are confused, and easily fall victim to the Kintail men, who stab, club or drown them on the spot, while some go ashore to dispatch any MacDonalds who manage to swim to safety.

Angus is wounded twice in the head and once in the body. The MacRaes bring him aboard their own galley, but he is dead by morning.

The other twenty-one crews in his fleet hear the uproar. They return to Kyleakin in such terror and confusion that each thinks its nearest neighbour is pursuing them. There they abandon their boats and cargo and take themselves off to their cousins in Sleat, from where they are ferried back to Knoydart and Glengarry. So, at any rate, goes the story as handed down in Ross-shire by MacRaes and MacKenzies; no doubt the version handed down in Sleat, Knoydart and Glengarry puts a different slant on it, if it survives at all.

Mackenzie's lady in Eilean Donnain has heard the sound of cannon during the night. Early in the morning her men return, not in one galley but in two. "We have brought you a guest," they say.

She looks down into the second galley, and sees the body of Angus of Glengarry. She gives it an honourable burial – not with his ancestors in Lochalsh, for that, she reckons, can only serve to strengthen his people's claim to the place, but amongst the graves of her own children at Kilduich in Kintail.

While all this was going on, Duart had agreed to help her husband by harrying the MacDonalds of Islay, Clanranald and Ardnamurchan. This was none too pleasing to the earl of Argyll, who regarded these kindreds as his dependants. When he heard that Duart had raided Ardnamurchan, he summoned the pair to Inveraray.

It was all sorted out, and they returned to Duart, but it took a long time. Now MacKenzie's wife was getting worried about her husband. The creeks and bays between them were still full of MacDonalds, so she despatched a man called Raibeart mac Dhòmhnail Uidhir to Duart to make arrangements for bringing him home.

When he arrived, Raibeart gave the brothers-in-law an account of what had happened. Although Clach gives it in English, the exchange that follows is interesting for the light it sheds on the social system of the day. Duart asks if any of Kintail's own kinsmen were among those who had behaved with such gallantry. He means the MacKenzies who formed the aristocracy, as opposed to the humble MacRaes and MacLennans. "No," says Robert.

Duart replies: "It was a great and audacious deed to be done by fellows."

Now the word behind "fellows" is *bodaich*, peasants – those who stayed behind in times of war to protect the womenfolk, guard the cattle and till the soil. MacKenzie then says, in Clach's words: "Truly, MacLean, they were not fellows that were there, but prime gentlemen, and such fellows as would act the enterprise better than myself and kinsmen."

It seems to me that this shows the relationship of mutual trust that existed between the

MacRaes and MacKenzies, a sort of devolution by which the MacRaes looked after the *dùthchas* while the MacKenzies kept their eyes on foreign affairs. Says MacLean, thinking no doubt of how the earl of Argyll made *him* feel like a bodach: “You have very great reason to make the more of them – he is a happy superior who has such a following!”

Duart now offers MacKenzie his best men to accompany him overland. MacKenzie declines, saying he will not put his friend to inconvenience, and that he’ll go home in his own boat, just as he came. His boat is a small one, however, and Duart persuades him to take his own big galley. Off he sails in Duart’s birlinn, with several gentlemen of the MacLeans, under the command of the Captain of Cairnburgh.

At this point we may at last return to Dòmhnall Denny, who says of MacKenzie: *Dh’innis e an imcheist san robh e dha a charaid Uachdaran Mhuile agus thubhairt esan gum b’ aithne dha fear a chitheadh dhachaidh e gu sàbhailte. Chuir e a dh’iarraidh creachadair mór mara ris an gairmear Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr a Muile.* (“He explained his predicament to his friend the Laird of Mull and he said he knew a man who would see him home safely. He sent for a great sea raider called Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr from Mull.”)

So who is Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr? The famous Mac Iain Ghiorr (who was certainly in league with Duart) was called Gilleasbaig, and he had a brother Raghnaid. Some sources say Mac Iain Ghiorr was an Appin Stewart, and the name Raibeart is common among the Stewarts. He may have had other brothers, but then, this event is taking place slightly too soon for it to have been any of them. Says Dòmhnall Denny: *Thubhairt Raibeart gum biodh e deònach falbh leis nam faigheadh e ceithir de na daoine a bu threuna am Muile. An nis b’e sàr spùinneadair a bh’ ann an Raibeart agus bha birlinn aige air an robh taobh dubh is taobh geal agus b’ann mar so a bhiodh e a’ mealladh a naimhdean.* (“Robert said that he would be willing to take him if he got four of the bravest men in Mull. Now Robert was a famous robber and he had a galley with a black side and a white side and this was how he tricked his enemies.”)

It’s worth noting that the man sent to bring MacKenzie home was Raibeart mac Dhòmhnail Uidhir, and that the man who actually brought him home was a MacLean, the Captain of Cairnburgh. Cairnburgh (*Càrnaborg*) is a sea stronghold in the Treshnish Isles – the sort of place frequented by Mac Iain Ghiorr. Personally, I think “Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr” consists of Raibeart mac Dhòmhnail Uidhir, Gilleasbaig Mac Iain Ghiorr and the Captain of Cairnburgh, all rolled into one.

Next time, thanks to the combined resources of Clach, Dòmhnall Denny and Miss Stewart, I will tell the story of their voyage home, and shed some more light on Robert’s identity.

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