

The pursuit through the kyles

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I introduced the tale of “Robert Mac Iain Ghiorr from Mull” as told to **Free Press** reader Miss Mina Stewart, Lochcarron, about 1938 by Donald Mackenzie (Dòmhnall Denny), Stromecarronach, when she went to him in search of place-names for a school project. *Tha àit an Ciseorn air am bheil Lag nan Còpag agus tha an sgeul so comh-cheangailte ris*, he began. “There is a place in Kishorn called *Lag nan Còpag* (the Hollow of the Dockens) and this story is connected with it.”

I tried to show that Dòmhnall Denny’s story fits remarkably well into the context of known historical events which took place about 1600. Kenneth, lord MacKenzie of Kintail, went to visit his brother-in-law MacLean of Duart, and a ferocious sea-battle took place in his absence between the MacRaes of Kintail and the MacDonalds of Glengarry and Knoydart at *Sgeir na Cailliche* in Lochalsh.

In the end I concluded that Dòmhnall Denny’s “Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr a Muile” is a confused memory of Raibeart mac Dhòmhnail Uidhir (who was sent by MacKenzie’s wife to fetch him home), of the pirate Mac Iain Ghiorr (whose name was Gilleasbaig, not Raibeart), and of the Captain of Cairnburgh (the MacLean seaman who actually brought him home).

This time I want to tell Dòmhnall Denny’s story of how “Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr” brought the lord of Kintail back home. *Thog iad orra a Muile gu Loch Chiseorn ach bha na Sgitheanaich a’ frithealadh orra aig Caol Réidhe*, he said. “They set off from Mull for Loch Kishorn but the Skyemen were waiting for them at Kyle Rhea.”

These Skyemen are the MacDonalds of Sleat, cousins and allies of the men who had been killed or humiliated at *Sgeir na Cailliche*, many of whom had lived to tell the tale. “*Thug thu thairis do mo naimhdean an nis mi,*” *ars Fear Chiseorn*. “You have given me over to my enemies now,” says the tacksman of Kishorn.

“Tacksman of Kishorn” would be the usual translation of *Fear Chiseorn*, but I’m pretty sure that all Dòmhnall Denny had in mind here was that this person had it in his power to let or sub-let the land around *Lag nan Còpag*. He goes on: *Ach is beag fios a bh’ aige air Raibeart agus a bhirlinn*. “But little did he know of Robert and his galley.”

This of course is a reference to Mac Iain Ghiorr’s famous galley of which it was said:

*Taobh dhith dubh is taobh dhith bàn
Mar bha bàta Mhic Iain Ghiorr.*

(“One side of her black and one side white / Like the boat of Mac Iain Ghiorr.”) Dòmhnall Denny continues: *Dh’fhalbhadh birlinn Raibeirt móran na bu luaithe na bàtaichean nan Sgitheanach agus nuair a fhuair e seachad orra b’e bàta geal a bha fa chomhair nan Sgitheanach an àite am bàta dubh a chaidh seachad orra bho chionn mionaid no dhà*. “Robert’s galley could go much faster than the Skyemen’s boats and when he had got past them it was a white boat that faced the Skyemen instead of the black boat that had passed them a minute or two before.”

We can compare this with the account of Kintail’s return from Duart given by Alexander Mackenzie (“Clach”) in his “History of the Clan Mackenzie”, taken from what he calls an “ancient manuscript”. The MacDonalds, says Clach, “convened all the boats and galleys they could to a certain island which lay in his course, and which he could not avoid passing”.

It’s a pity the island isn’t named, but I think the choice lies between Eilean Iarmain in Sleat and the Eilean Bàn where the Skye Bridge is now – in other words, an island that lay firmly in MacDonald territory at the broad entrance to Kyle Rhea, or one that lay between MacKinnon and MacKenzie territory at the narrow exit from the Kyle of Lochalsh. At this point Clach is quoting his source directly, and it’s a little bit garbled: “So, coming within sight of the island, having a good prospect of a number of boats, after they had ebbed in a certain harbour, and men also, making ready to set out to sea.”

It sounds more like Eilean Iarmain than the Eilean Bàn, I think. “This occasioned the captain to use a stratagem, and steer directly to the harbour, and still as they came forward he caused lower the sail, which the other party perceiving made them forbear putting out their boats, persuading themselves that it was a galley they expected from Ardnamurchan, but they

had no sooner come forgainst the harbour but the captain caused hoist sail, set oars and steers aside, immediately bangs up a bagpiper, and gives them shots.”

Again it sounds like Eilean Iarmain, which enjoys a view down the open channel to the hills of Ardnamurchan, and which has a good harbour where the MacDonalds’ boats could conveniently be “ebbed”. With great courage, then, the skipper of MacKenzie’s boat has decided that rather than holding to a laborious course around the Knoydart shore and being caught by boats from Eilean Iarmain before he can get into Kyle Rhea, he will row straight towards Eilean Iarmain and so make the MacDonalds assume that he is a friend. Then, as soon as they get close to the harbour where the MacDonald boats are beached, on a prearranged signal everyone on board springs into action – the oars, including the steering oar at the helm, are set aside, the sails are hoisted, shots are fired, and to cap it all, MacKenzie’s piper leaps to his feet and “bangs up”.

What a moment! “The rest, finding the cheat and their own mistake, made such a hurly-burly setting out their boats, with their haste they broke some of them, and some of themselves were bruised and had broken shins also for their prey, and such as went out whole, perceiving the galley so far off, thought it was folly to pursue her any further, they all returned wiser than they came from home.”

The tactic had worked, and although there’s no mention of *taobh dhith dubh is taobh dhith bàn*, it’s very like the sort of thing that Mac Iain Ghiorr became famous for – they approached Eilean Iarmain looking friendly, turned around dramatically and left it very much as an enemy.

That’s all that Clach has to say about the voyage, but it’s hard to believe that the subsequent journey through the two kyles could have been entirely uneventful, and sure enough Dòmhnall Denny tells us: *A chòrr air sin b’e bàta fada caol a bh’ anns a’ bhirlinn agus fhuair i troimh chaolas cumhang ris an canar Loch a’ Bhàit ach ’s ann a ghramaich na Sgitheanaich ann.* “In addition to that the galley was a long narrow boat and it got through a narrow channel called *Loch a’ Bhàit* but the Skyemen got stuck in it.”

Loch a’ Bhàit (or *Loch a’ Bhàitht’*) means “the Loch of the Drowning”, but where is it? My guess is that it’s somewhere among the small islands and channels around the coast north of the Kyle of Lochalsh – that when the Skyemen had got over their surprise, they by no means gave up, but launched their boats, pursued the MacKenzies through the two kyles, and finally caught up with them in an exhausted condition soon after they had passed the Eilean Bàn, only to be given the slip in the way Dòmhnall Denny has described, for he says next: *Ruig Raibeart agus a chompanaich An Àird gu sàbhailte. An sin thog Raibeart agus a dhaoine am bàta an àird anns a’ choille agus chaill na Sgitheanaich sgeul orra agus ’na dheighe sin b’ fheudar dhaibh tilleadh dhachaidh.* “Robert and his companions reached *An Àird* in safety. Then Robert and his men lifted their boat up into the wood and the Skyemen lost track of them and after that they had to go home.”

An Àird is the promontory between Loch Carron and Loch Kishorn, so the MacKenzies were home and dry. Says Dòmhnall Denny: *Bha Uachdaran Lochcarainn cho mòr an comain Raibeart gun tug e dha màg thalaimh ris an canar Lag nan Còpag.* “The Laird of Lochcarron was so indebted to Robert that he gave him an arable field of land called *Lag nan Còpag*.”

The “Laird of Lochcarron” is of course Kenneth MacKenzie of Kintail himself. Indeed, he’s entitled to be called that, because soon afterwards he laid siege to Strome Castle and sent the MacDonalds packing from Lochcarron for ever. But Dòmhnall Denny says one final thing which solves our principal mystery, the identity of Raibeart Mac Iain Gheairr, once and for all. *A réir aithris ghabh Raibeart còmhnaidh an so agus b’e sinnsear nan Ceannaideach anns a’ chearn so de Albainn.* “It’s said that Robert settled here and that he was the ancestor of the Kennedys in this part of Scotland.”

The Captain of Cairnburgh was no Kennedy. Mac Iain Ghiorr was no Kennedy. That leaves only one candidate. *Raibeart mac Dhòmhnail Uidhir*, the man with no surname who had been sent from Eilean Donnain by the wife of MacKenzie of Kintail to fetch her husband home from Mull.