

## John Mackenzie and “the enterprise”

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I introduced Robert Chambers from Peebles (1802-71). Over my next few articles I intend to conduct a sort of scientific experiment. I will compare his book “History of the Rebellion in Scotland in the Year 1745-6” with “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa, no Bliadhna Thearlaich” by his contemporary, John Mackenzie from Gairloch (1805-48).

These two writers had a lot in common. They were both interested in folklore, social history and traditional poetry. And they started young. Chambers made his name with “Traditions of Edinburgh” (1823) and “Popular Rhymes of Scotland” (1826). Mackenzie made his with the collected songs of William Ross (1830) and a great anthology, “Sàr Obair nam Bard Gaelach: The Beauties of Gaelic Poetry” (1841).

Both men thought for themselves and rebelled against the narrow religion of their day. They had a mischievous sense of humour and enjoyed lacing their work with anecdotes. They loved books, and found ways of working with them full-time. Chambers became a bookseller in Edinburgh, starting from scratch then joining his elder brother to found the publishing firm of W. & R. Chambers. From 1836 to 1843 Mackenzie’s job was keeping accounts in the Glasgow University Printing Office in Dunlop Street, and from 1844 to his death in 1848 he worked as an editor and translator for an Edinburgh firm of Gaelic publishers, Maclachlan & Stewart – all in all, as his monument in Gairloch tells us, he wrote, edited or translated at least thirty books.

There were of course *some* differences. Both men started in life with nothing except the best education that their parents had been able to give them. Chambers became literate in English and Scots, Mackenzie in English and Gaelic. Chambers was an affable, easy-going man who married twice, while Mackenzie, who never married, was clever and very good with money but had a very peculiar manner and was difficult to work with, perhaps – who knows? – because of a blow in the head he received in 1823 when working as a joiner at the Gairloch manse.

The biggest difference of all was simply this: in the 1820s and 1830s a Borderer in Edinburgh was welcomed as a native, but a Highlander in Glasgow was resented as an asylum-seeker. So Chambers got rich, and Mackenzie stayed poor.

In 1843 Mackenzie’s first chance to escape from the printing-office arrived in the form of an offer from an Edinburgh firm, Thornton & Collie, to publish a book in Gaelic about the ’45, the centenary of which was fast approaching. They were, they told him, looking for a translator. They would furnish the materials, if he could find the subscribers.

Thanks to John’s cousin Alexander Mackenzie, author of “The Highland Clearances” and many other books, we know exactly what the contract said. D. R. Collie would pay John £3 for his translation. The retail price of the book would be five shillings. Each subscriber was to pay this amount to John, out of which he retained sixpence as his commission, and another sixpence as his fee for delivering the book to the subscriber. He therefore had to pay the publisher four shillings for each book until the cost of paper, printing and binding had been paid. From that point on the remaining stock belonged equally to both parties, either of whom might dispose of them as he wished on payment of 3s 6d per copy to the other.

Slave wages, but an opportunity for John to do what he most enjoyed doing – wandering around the Highlands exchanging songs and stories and looking for subscribers. What is of interest to us nowadays however is the book itself and how it was put together.

Collie was treading cautiously, for he was breaking new ground. Bonnie Prince Charlie is an icon now and adorns the lids of shortbread tins; it’s pretty well known that his opponent at Culloden, the Duke of Cumberland, King George’s youngest son, gave his name to a flower in England (sweet William) and a weed in Scotland (stinking Billy). In 1843 it would still have been considered proper to divide the honours on the Prince (sweet Charles, stinking Charlie?) while putting the Duke on the shortbread tins.

An account of the ’45 called “Ascanius, or the Young Adventurer”, published in Edinburgh in 1802, shows how political correctness stood then. It sold so many copies that I was able to pick one up at the Edinburgh Book Fair last week for only £50. It makes fascinating reading. The author doesn’t give his name. He makes it perfectly clear that his hero is Prince Charles, whom he sometimes calls “Ascanius”, sometimes “the Prince”.

Everyone else gets his (or her) real name.

The Jacobite victories of Prestonpans and Falkirk are played down, the main story being Ascanius's "great escape" after Culloden. There's nothing of Cumberland's butchery – on the contrary, he is praised. "The humility, piety, and humanity of the Duke of Cumberland, are no less conspicuous, and admirable, on this occasion, than his prowess."

Hanoverian propaganda about Jacobite savagery is dealt with like this. When the Jacobite Earl of Kilmarnock is about to be beheaded on Tower Hill in London on 18 August 1746, he has the following conversation with the next victim, Lord Balmerino.

Balmerino: "Does your Lordship know of any order signed by the Prince to give no quarter at the battle of Culloden?"

Kilmarnock: "No."

Balmerino: "Nor I neither; therefore, it seems to be an invention to justify our own murders."

Kilmarnock: "I do not think this a fair inference, because I was informed, after I was prisoner at Inverness, by several officers, that such an order, signed George Murray, was in the Duke's custody."

Balmerino: "George Murray! Then they should not charge it on the Prince."

Although he has no interest in the atrocities perpetrated in the Highlands, the author's verdict on the executions of prominent Jacobites in London, Kensington, Carlisle, Brampton, Penrith and York (none took place in Scotland) make interesting reading. "There were some circumstances in the manner of the execution of some of the criminals, on this occasion, which cannot but give offence to a humane and delicate mind; before they were quite dead, they were cut down from the gallows, their heads severed from their bodies, their bowels and hearts torn out, and some of them thrown into a fire: perhaps this was rather cruelty than justice; and yet, if we consider the extraordinary circumstances of their crimes, these things were in some measure necessary; not, indeed, when considered under the notion of justice executed upon the criminals, but to give all a dreadful impression of the heinousness of the crime of rebellion against the state, and thereby deter them from all such treasonable practices . . .

"Shocking as the circumstances of the execution were, yet we find, that, at that time many of the spectators gave loud shouts of applause: the triumph of ignoble souls, uninspired by sentiment, and insensible to the tender and delicate feelings of humanity! The mind, indeed, must necessarily disapprove the crime, and condemn the criminal; but, to give shouts of applause at the sufferings of our fellow-creatures, betrays a rude and savage disposition: however, indeed, it was scarce to be expected, that the blind English mob, who are stupid and insensible to every thing, should possess the finer feelings of the heart."

The last time I heard sentiments like this was a few weeks ago when an SFA spokesman compared the exemplary behaviour of Celtic supporters in Seville with the bad reputation of English fans.

It was Robert Chambers who finally set the record straight. His "History of the Rebellion in Scotland in 1745-6" was first published in "Constable's Miscellany" in 1827 and went through many editions. I have a photocopy of the fifth (1840) in front of me. In his preface he refers variously to the '45 as civil war, insurrection and rebellion, in that order. In his chapter "Transactions Immediately after the Battle of Culloden" he refers to the "sycophant publications of the time" which stress Cumberland's humanity. This he calls "cant", and he proceeds to tell "better authenticated" stories of the butchery which every Highlander knows to be a matter of fact.

It's worth remembering that Chambers came from a county with strong Jacobite traditions. Viscount Elibank was a Jacobite conspirator. John Murray of Broughton was Charles's secretary throughout the campaign. And the Earl of Traquair lost his title as a result of his support for the Prince. The great gates of Traquair House, a few miles down the road from where I live, have remained shut since his army passed through them in 1745. In the true spirit of her ancestor, the present laird, Catherine Maxwell Stuart, stood here as Labour candidate for the Scottish Parliament on 1 May even though it's one of those places where they'd elect a donkey if someone stuck "Lib-Dem" on it!

By 1843 Robert Chambers's popularity and scholarship – his careful use of original documents, his balanced presentation of the oral memories of the people – had made it safe for Collie to publish a revisionist history of the '45. But to do this in Gaelic?

In John Mackenzie he had found an able man but not a trustworthy one. For example, fourteen of the thirty-one songs in his 1830 edition of William Ross were taken straight from earlier publications, yet in his second edition (1834) he had the audacity to write: "Previous to the publication of the first edition of Ross's Songs, the only record of their existence was their floating through the district on the memories of the people, and the only method of their publication was by the lips of fair maidens and fond admirers."

Not only was he a liar, but he was willing to take liberties with history. As I showed on this page in November 2001, to create a good story around the Jacobite song "Mo Rùn Geal Òg" for "Sàr Obair" he took the exploits of two genuine heroes of Culloden – Gillies MacBean and Robert MacGillivray – and ascribed them to a man whose wife had accused him of cowardice, William Chisholm.

On top of all this, in an era – the 1840s – which saw revolutions all over Europe, John's own politics can best be described as Jacobitism mixed with Jacobinism. With the Stuarts gone, what harm a republic? A good example can be found in, of all things, his 1844 edition of "The Life and Conversion of Dugald Buchanan", one of his first projects for Maclachlan & Stewart.

John was totally out of sympathy with Buchanan, one of our greatest evangelical hymn-writers. At one point Buchanan states: *Anns a' bhliadhna 1745, (Bliadhna Thearlaich) dh'éirich a' chuid mhòr de mo chàirdean leis a' Phrionns' ann an àr-a-mach an aghaidh an rìgh, thuit cuid diu sa' chath, agus chaidh cuid eile chur gu bàs ann an Carlisle.* ("In the year 1745, Charles's Year, most of my friends rose with the Prince in rebellion against the king, some of them fell in battle, and others were put to death in Carlisle.")

To this John responds (in English) in a rare footnote: "One of the individuals here alluded to was Francis Buchannan of Arnprior; he had not been concerned in the enterprise of 1745 in any way. He was taken prisoner at his own house of Leny, Perthshire, and carried to Carlisle, and condemned by false witnesses, and hung on the 28th of October 1746 . . ."

The word "enterprise", where Buchanan used *àr-a-mach* "rebellion", is a Jacobite shibboleth. Even Chambers didn't use it.

How much of John's reputation preceded him I don't know. What is certain, however, is that his contract specified "that John Mackenzie shall translate into Gaelic the History of Prince Charles Edward, from materials in English to be furnished to him by D. R. Collie". As far as I can see, the "materials" consisted simply of Robert Chambers's book. Yet the title-page of "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa, no Bliadhna Thearlaich", which duly appeared in 1844, says that the book is: "Le Iain Mac-Choinnich." By John Mackenzie, not translated by him.

So what did Mackenzie add, and what did he take away? That's the big question which I will start answering next time.

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