

Charlie's Year (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

*'Tis wonderful
That an invisible instinct should so frame them
To loyalty unlearn'd, honour untaught,
Civility not seen from others, valour
That wildly grows in them, but yields a crop
As if it had been sowed.*

THESE words from Shakespeare's Celtic play, "Cymbeline", are used by Robert Chambers to introduce a chapter called "The Highlanders" in the 1840 edition of his "History of the Rebellion in Scotland in 1745-6".

It's the second chapter in Chambers's book. With a sense of dramatic flair that was typical of him, he had used his first, "Prince Charles's Voyage and Landing", to dive straight into the plot.

This was a gift to John Mackenzie from Gairloch when in 1843 he was invited by Edinburgh publishers Thornton & Collie to "translate into Gaelic the History of Prince Charles Edward, from materials in English to be furnished to him by D. R. Collie". For clearly the "materials" consisted of Chambers's book, but the aim seems to have been to disguise the fact that this was what Mackenzie was doing, and Mackenzie's name duly appeared on the title-page of "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa, no Bliadhna Thearlaich" (1844) as if he were the author.

So Chambers's chapter two becomes Mackenzie's chapter one, "Staid nan Gael agus na Gaeldachd roi' Bhliadhna Thearlaich" ("The State of the Highlanders and Highlands before Charlie's Year"), and the two books look entirely different from the beginning.

How then does Mackenzie translate into Gaelic a chapter which presents the Gael as a people whose loyalty is "unlearn'd", whose honour is "untaught", whose civility is "not seen from others", and whose valour "yields a crop / As if it had been sowed"?

It's an important question, not least nowadays. Burns saw it as a gift from God "tae see ourself as ithers see us". But when that gift is so misused that an education system is devoted exclusively to it for three centuries, people can actually cease to see themselves any *other* way – they lose confidence in their language, their literature, their identity, their feeling of personal worth.

That has happened. And the danger is that with Secure Status it will continue to happen. Everything from street signs to school examinations will be bilingual. That will be good because it will provide lots of jobs for Gaelic speakers, but it will be bad when the Gaelic version is just a translation from English.

We can see it happening already. The SQA offers exams in "History through the Medium of Gaelic". Does this allow a people-centred, Gaelic-centred, "us"-rather-than-"them" view of the Clearances? Not at all. The "Gaelic" exam is the English one, literally translated. There's no separate curriculum at all.

So let's see what Mackenzie does with Chambers's text – how he interprets those chilling words in his contract, "translate into Gaelic . . . from materials in English".

Well, he ignores the Shakespeare. Good start. Chambers now tells us that the Highlanders were "then regarded as the rudest and least civilised portion" of the nation which Prince Charlie saw himself as destined to govern. Do you see the problem? He doesn't say *who* regarded the Highlanders in this way. To Gaelic readers who have retained a sense of personal worth the description "rudest and least civilised" is a stereotype not of themselves but of the ordinary people of the Lowlands and England. What's more, Mackenzie's book was going to show that the label applied not just to ordinary people but to many members of the ruling class as well – remember those disgusting executions I talked about last time?

This then is what Mackenzie says (the first words of his book): *Mu'n cheart àm anns an tainig am Prionnsa do dh' Albainn bha na Gàeil gu ìre bhig na'n gnàths mar na prìomh aithrichean; gach fine nan treubhan air leth; agus gach ceann-cinnidh mar rìgh a riaghladh thar a luchd-leanmhuinn féin.* In other words, he tells us that by 1745 the ways of the Highlanders had changed little from those of the "first fathers", a Biblical-sounding phrase

which he uses inclusively to remind us that the Gael are the founding fathers of the Scottish nation – divided into tribes, the leaders of which were like kings over their people.

Mackenzie then reminds us of the tribes' heroic lifestyle, how they lived mainly on flesh and milk, the produce of hunting and cattle-raids, along with a little bread, *oir cha robh am buntàta mu'n àm sin air sgaoileadh nam measg* – “for potatoes were not yet widely in use”. So he has his own little bit of teaching to do, distinct from Chambers. It was, he says, a bloody lifestyle, and he uses the word *fuilteach*, but concludes with dignity. *Mheal iad mar sin an sean nòs dùchasach bho chiad linntean euchdach an sinnsir gu latha Chuil-Fhodair, ach on uair sin faodar a ràdh 'gu'm beil “na Gàèil 's an cinn fo fhliodh”!*

So he teaches and criticises, but all on his own terms. “They thus enjoyed their traditional lifestyle from the first heroic centuries of their ancestors until the battle of Culloden, but since then it may be said that ‘the Highlanders’ heads are lower than chickweed’!”

It's more a *response* than a translation, and in far fewer words than Chambers used. Chambers speaks of the remoteness of the Highlands, the “peculiar language, dress, and manners” of the people, and their “very imperfect obedience to government”, remarking that “there was to be seen in the Highlanders of Scotland nearly a distinct picture of those early shepherd days, which are still so endearingly remembered in the traditions and poetry of the refined world”.

Ho-hum. It only goes to prove all things are relative.

A more specific point made by Chambers is that “the Highlanders did not now exceed 100,000, or a twelfth of the whole population of Scotland”. Mackenzie ignores this, and rightly. Our evidence nowadays suggests that the proportion of Gaelic-speakers in Scotland fell below 50 per cent for the first time at some point between 1500 and 1600. Using figures dating from 1755, it was calculated in 1808 that monoglot Gaelic speakers formed 23 per cent of the population. All in all it seems likely that in 1745 Scotland had about 1,200,000 people, of whom a quarter (300,000) were Gaelic speakers.

Chambers now says that, partly because of what he calls their “perpetual state of war with the neighbours who had driven them to their northern fastnesses”, the Highlanders were all more or less professional soldiers, and held humbler trades in contempt. He backs this up with a bit of information he had got from H. R. Duff, Muirtown (the one near Forres, I suppose): that when mentioning such trades the Highlander invariably said things like “by your leave, a tailor”, or “a weaver, and save your presence”.

This is up Mackenzie's street. Having told us what the Gall thought of the Gaidheal, and what the Gaidheal thought of the Gall, he claims that the Gaidheal was only contemptuous of trades in so far as they had been learned from the Gall! *Mar thuirt a mhaighdean, “Cha b'e'n ceard a dheanadh an spàin mo roghainn de dh'fhearai bh, ach an saor a chumadh agus a dh'fhuaigheadh am bàt, an clachair a thogadh an tùr agus an gobha a liobhadh an claidheamh.”* (As the girl said, “The tinker who'd make the spoon would not be my choice of men, but the carpenter who'd design and make the boat, the mason who'd build the tower and the smith who'd polish the sword.”)

Most Highland tailors, shoemakers and weavers were cripples, Mackenzie goes on, and such people couldn't be mentioned in polite company except with such words as *tailear le'r cead* or *breabadair le cead na cuideachd*.

Having vindicated Duff, he tells a story of how Ailean mac Ruairidh of Clanranald held a feast in Castle Tirrim, and had to provide a separate table for the tradesmen because the warriors wouldn't sit beside them. Part of the *duan* spoken by his *gille-bùird* on this occasion was still remembered all over the Highlands: *Dean suidhe 'Thailear, dean suidhe 'Thuairnear, suidheadh gach fear mar a's deise, agus suidh thusa a Chèaird an dàimh an Leisdear.* (“Sit down Tailor, sit down Turner, let each man sit where he likes, and you Tinker sit beside the Arrowmaker.”)

Chambers now remarks that “the Highlanders, in the earlier periods of history, appear to have possessed no superiority over the Lowlanders in the use of arms”, and that at Harlaw in 1410 “the largest army that ever left the Highlands was checked by an inferior number of Lowlanders”. Mackenzie speaks of the hardihood of the Highlanders and says that they won many bloody battles *an uair a bhiodh trìuir nàimhdean ma choinneamh gach aoin diù* – “when there would be three of the enemy for every one of themselves”.

Had Chambers and Mackenzie been alive today they would have been invited to a TV studio to debate face to face. As Chambers was sharp, Mackenzie was combative and they

both had a sense of humour, it would have been fun.

Both now launch into a list of battles, and this got Mackenzie into hot water. Reviewing “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” in a Gaelic periodical in 1844, a Fort Augustus schoolmaster called John Forbes (he later became minister of Sleat) pointed out that Mackenzie had made some extraordinary errors, such as saying that the battle of Kilsyth was fought in 1645 for James III. Forbes was right – speaking of the Highlanders, Mackenzie says: *Ann sa bhliadhna 1645 chuir iad latha Chill-Saoidh an aghaidh Rìgh Shasuinn, ann an aobhar Sheumais an III. Rìgh Alba.*

Forbes hadn’t twigged that Mackenzie’s work was based on Chambers’s. Chambers speaks of the battle of Sauchieburn where the Highlanders “espoused the cause of James III”. He doesn’t exactly give the date, but says it was “sixty-eight years after” Harlaw; then in the next paragraph he speaks of Kilsyth in 1645.

So Mackenzie had taken his eye off the ball. He was, I think, too busy thinking up clever things to say – his separate curriculum. Condensing furiously, by the end of the same paragraph he has reached Killiecrankie (1689). Chambers remarks that the Jacobite leader there, Claverhouse, was known in Gaelic as *Ian Dhu nan Cath*. Spurning anything so trite, Mackenzie calls him “*Cleubhars uaibhreach nan each,*” *no mar their cuid eile “Tighearna Bhaile-nan-Seamrag”* (“proud Clavers of the horses”, or as others say “The Laird of Shamrock Town”).

For good measure he adds, referring to James III, that Claverhouse fought the battle *ann an aobhar a mhic do’n goireadh iad féin am Prionns’ òg* (“in the cause of his son whom they themselves called the young Prince”), which is a misunderstanding of Chambers’s remark that the Highlanders were as ready to fight under Claverhouse “in behalf of King James, as they had been fifty years before to rise up for his father”. The identity of the “young prince” is thus as clear as mud, which is a pity because Mackenzie, a keen piper, adds a footnote: *So an t-uasal do’n rinneadh am port Pìobaireachd do’n ainm “Fàilt’ a Phrionns’ òig”*. (“This is the nobleman to whom the pìobaireachd ‘The Young Prince’s Salute’ was composed.”)

Mackenzie offers a faithful digest of Chambers’s substantial account of the rising of 1715, but omits all reference to that of 1719, to which Chambers devotes a paragraph. This is probably because the failure of the ’19 was due to Seaforth’s poor leadership. A sensitive matter for a Mackenzie.

Now for the next error picked up (not surprisingly) by Forbes – Mackenzie’s statement that Forts George, Augustus and William were built (*thog iad trì daighnichean*) between 1715 and 1745. How did it happen? This is what Chambers says: “Three forts, one at Inverness, a second, named Fort Augustus, at Killiewhimmen, and a third, named Fort William, at Inverlochrie, in Lochaber, were kept in full garrison, as a means of overawing the disaffected clans.”

Wake up, Mackenzie.

Chambers concludes his chapter with an afterthought. Notice should have been taken, he says in a footnote, of the effect of poetry on the minds of the Highlanders. He says in italics: *there were innumerable songs and ballads tending to advance the cause of the Stuarts, while there was not one to depreciate them.*

He adds: “A Lowlander and a modern cannot easily comprehend, nor can he set forth, the power of this simple but energetic engine. It has been described to us, however, as something perfectly overpowering.”

Mackenzie rose to the bait. Each of the last two pages of his first chapter is embellished with a verse. One begins with the well-known motto *Lean gu dlù ri cliù do shinnsir*. The other wishes that ‘the King over the water’ would return. It ends in good Ross-shire Gaelic:

*Oir bithidh ar cuid ga n-ar dìth,
'S ar cinn ma chitir biodag oirn'!*

(“For we will lose all we have, / And our heads if a dirk’s seen on us!”)

25 July 2003