

Charlie's Year (5)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ROBERT Chambers is interested in Edinburgh. Born in the Borders, he has lived in the city since he was a schoolboy, knows its people and its history intimately, and is the author of “The Traditions of Edinburgh”, a valuable work which is still deservedly in print today.

John Mackenzie, by contrast, is a Glasgow Gael. His own great work, “Sàr Obair nam Bard Gàèlach”, was published there in 1841. Only in 1845, it seems, the year after the publication of “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa”, does he leave his lodgings in Clyde Street for the last time and board the newly-invented “iron horse” to go and work on Gaelic projects for Edinburgh publisher Maclachlan & Stewart. Just three years later he is dead.

It’s no great surprise, then, to find that when Mackenzie is commissioned in March 1843 by another Edinburgh publisher, Thornton & Collie, to make his translation of Chambers’s “History of the Rebellion in Scotland in 1745-6”, he ignores the seventh chapter, “Alarm of Edinburgh”. This is where Chambers tells us about the politics and newspapers of the city, and the arguments that raged over whether to defend it from the advancing Jacobites; Mackenzie just gets on with telling the story through the Highlanders’ eyes.

So Mackenzie’s chapter 7, “Turas a Phrionns’ a’ Dhuneideann”, is Chambers’s chapter 8, “Charles’s March upon Edinburgh”. The first point of interest comes as Charles’s army crosses the Forth at the Ford of Frew, about eight miles above Stirling. It was, says Chambers, his Rubicon. “Hitherto, he had been in a land where the Highlanders had a natural advantage over any troops which might be sent to oppose them; but he was now come to the frontier of a country where, if they fought at all, they must fight on equal, or perhaps inferior, terms.”

Mackenzie translates: *Gus an t-àm so bha na Gàèil ann an dùthaich anns a robh gach cothrom ac’ thar an arm-dhéarg, ach air a mhachair chòmhnaid réidh bha gach cothrom aig na dearganaich orrasan, a thaobh gur ann le ’n cuid mosgaidean a dheanadh na Sasannaich euchd sam bith.* Which is faithful enough to Chambers, except that he adds the explanation “because it was with their muskets the English performed any feats of arms”.

Note that he calls the Government forces “English”. Will he still be keeping this up when he gets to Culloden? Colonel Gardiner, whose dragoons retreat before the Jacobites, is no Englishman, but the proprietor of a small estate in East Lothian. And that’s the direction the dragoons take.

Charles’s army reaches Linlithgow on the morning of 15 September. “It was Sunday,” says Chambers, “and the people were about to attend worship in their ancient church; but the arrival of so distinguished a visitor suspended their pious duties for at least one day. Linlithgow . . . was a decidedly Jacobite town; and on the present occasion, it is said that even some of the magistrates could not restrain their loyal enthusiasm. Charles was conducted in triumph to the palace of his ancestors, where a handsome entertainment was prepared for him . . .”

We may contrast Chambers’s top-down account, in which Charles is “conducted” by the town’s civic leaders, with Mackenzie’s bottom-up rendering in which Charles is “followed” by the ordinary people of the town. Mackenzie has his own source of information, as his words “according to what I was told” make very clear: *A réir mar dh’-innseadh dhomh, cha deach duine dhiù do ’n eaglais air an Dòmhnach sin, ach lean iad am Prionns’ le buaidh-chaitheam éibhinn gus an deach e steach do sheann lùchairt Rioghail a shinnsir.*

Mackenzie enjoys telling Chambers’s story about what happens when the Prince’s army camps on the night of Monday 16 September at Slateford – now an inner suburb, then a country village. The army bivouacs in a field called Gray’s Park “which at that time bore a crop of peas nearly ripe”. Mackenzie calls it *Pàirc a Ghreadhaich*; I suppose it’s where the posh Gray’s Loan is nowadays.

The “proprietor of the ground” applies to Charles at his lodgings in Gray’s Mill for indemnification for the loss of his crop. Mackenzie calls him *an Galla-bhodach, da’m buinneadh a pheasair*. “The Lowland peasant who owned the peas.” He’s asked if he’ll take the Prince Regent’s bill for the amount, “to be paid when the troubles of the country should be concluded”. His reaction sums up everything that makes the Highlander look down on the Lowlander. He’d prefer a bill from some “here-awa” person, he says – *urr’ eigin eile a b’ fhaisg’ air làimh*, Mackenzie translates helpfully, “some other responsible person nearer at hand”. The Prince laughs and asks if the Duke of Perth will do. “The rustic,” concludes Chambers, “accepted a promissory note from the duke.” *Ghabh e sgrìobhadh Dhiùc Pheairt ’san t-sùim*.

Chambers here begins a fresh chapter, “Capture of Edinburgh”, but Mackenzie continues without a break. That same night Charles issues his ultimatum to the magistrates, and Mackenzie chooses to translate the letter in full. It begins: “From our camp, 16th September 1745.” *Bho ar Càmp, an 6-amh latha-diag de’n t-Seachdamh Mìos, 1745*.

The seventh month? A little Latin is a dangerous thing. September may mean “the seventh month”, but for two thousand years it’s been the ninth. Mackenzie does a good job of the letter itself, but gets carried away where Charles says that “if you suffer any of the usurper’s troops to enter the town, or any of the cannon arms, or ammunition . . . to be carried off, we shall . . . resent it accordingly”. The “usurper” becomes simply *eas-caraid* (“enemy”), but Charles’s (or rather Secretary Murray’s?) delicately threatening verb “resent” is quite lost: *diolaidh sinn da réir*, says Mackenzie baldly, “we shall avenge accordingly”.

The capital was impossible to defend. In the chapter which Mackenzie omitted, Chambers explains: “Edinburgh was then partly surrounded by a wall, and partly by a lake. The wall was of little use but to check smuggling . . . while the lake was fordable in many places . . . Even though its walls could have kept out the Highlanders, the inhabitants could have been immediately starved into terms, by the want of water and bread, both of which articles they had to bring from without.”

Perhaps Mackenzie didn’t read this, perhaps he forgot about it, most likely he wanted to convey the sense of awe with which the Highland troops beheld the city. I translate. “Before I proceed any further in this part of the ‘Eachdraidh’, I ought to relate that Edinburgh was at that time surrounded by a stout high wall of stone and lime, in order to keep enemies out in time of war.

“On this wall were many very strong gates, constructed of heart of oak (*smior daraich*) and of iron in such a way that they were not easy to break down. When they realised that the Highlanders had come close to the city these gates were closed to keep them out; nor were the inhabitants themselves permitted to go out or in as they were accustomed.”

It’s the style not of Chambers but of tales told around the fire. And as the drama unfolds we notice essential differences in detail.

Charles gets little sleep in Gray’s Mill as deputations come and go. The magistrates are playing for time. Cope’s army has come by sea from Inverness and is landing at Dunbar. So 900 picked men, led by Locheil, Keppoch, Stewart of Ardshiel and quartermaster Sullivan, with Secretary Murray as guide, muster by moonlight on the Boroughmuir “where they could hear the watches calling the rounds within the castle”.

They have a barrel of powder so that if necessary they can blow up one of the gates. Chambers: “Strict silence and abstinence from intoxicating liquors were enjoined the men, the latter precaution being probably less with a regard to the success of the enterprise than the safety of life and property, after the troops should have obtained possession of the town. Several plans for breaking into the city were agitated, but at length it was determined to attempt getting access by stratagem.”

Mackenzie ignores the offensive remark about drink. “Given that the Highlanders knew that they couldn’t blow up the gate without injury to some of the townspeople, and that it

was their consistent policy to avoid damage either to property or to persons, they tried to get in by stratagem (*le mealltaireachd*).”

This involves one of Locheil’s men knocking at the Netherbow wicket dressed in riding-coat and hunting-cap like a dragoons officer’s servant, and asking permission to fetch something his master has left behind. Chambers: “The man did as he was bid, but without success, the guard ordering him to retire, under pain of being shot at.” Mackenzie: “This lad did as he was asked: he arrived at the gate, knocked (*bhuail e bas-ri-crann*, ‘struck palm-to-pole’), and gave his message! in English, but our hero’s English (*’Bheurl’ aig mo laochan*) was so Highland that the gatekeepers realised he was a deceiver (*mealltair*). They bid him be off immediately (*a thiotadh*) or they’d put a bullet in him.”

It’s an anti-Jacobite story, which reminds us that, above all, Mackenzie just likes stories. He adds something else not in Chambers, that Locheil and his fellow-officers are “deliberating how to dig under one of the gates” (*beachdachadh ciod an doigh air an claghaicheadh iad fo aon de na geataichean*) when events take over. Chambers: “The hackney coach which took out the last party of deputies to Slateford, and afterwards brought them back to the city, was now returning to its master’s quarters in the Canongate. The port was opened, contrary to orders, to allow it egress.”

This has the ring of truth. The cabbie came in at the West Port and wants to leave now by the Netherbow, for the Canongate lies outside the city to the east. Mackenzie misunderstands. *Thainig an t-each ’san càrbad ma dheireadh a chaidh le teachdaireachd a dh’ionnsaidh a Phrionns’ as a bhaile nis air ais, agus dh’ fhosgladh an geata gu leigeil a staigh*. “The last horse and carriage to bring a deputation to the Prince from the city now returned, and the gate was opened to let it in.”

It doesn’t matter. Seizing their chance, Locheil and his men burst in before the gate closes. No disagreement here. Chambers: “They rushed into the High Street, sword in hand, with one of those loud outcries with which they were accustomed to make an onset in the field of battle.” Mackenzie: *Bha’n freiceadan cho lag is nach do chuir iad a bheag a dh’éis air na Gàèil,—a chaidh air ball suas an t-sràid àrd le claidheamh rùist’ ann an dòrn gach laoich, agus thog iad iolach chaithream, ’mar bu ghnà leis na seana Ghàèil a dheanamh, an àm cosnadh na buaidh-làraich*.

Chambers speaks of “the neighbouring people” looking out of their windows in the dusk of the morning as the streets fill. Mackenzie revels in the scene. *Thog an iolach so muinntir a’ bhaile as an leapaichean “eadar shean a’s òg, ghruagach a’s bhréideach,” agus ann am priobadh nan sùl bha gach ceann a mach air na h-uineagan a’ coimhead nan Gàèl*. His quotation – “both old and young, maiden and married woman” – will be from a traditional *sgeulachd*, to link the heroes’ triumph with some epic moment in literature.

He throws in another. Chambers says that “the pipes screamed out a stormy pibroch”, while Mackenzie portrays the heroes *a’ màrsail suas an t-sràid “le’ fichead pìob mhòr,” a’ toirt air ballachan nan taighean freagairt do sgal nan seannsair*. “With twenty great pipes.” Where’s that from?

The tune they play is known to Chambers: “We’ll awa to Sherramuir to haud the Whigs in order.” Mackenzie seems to know it too.

*O! triallamaid gu Sliabh an t-Siorraim
’Chuir na Cuigs’ an òrdugh.*

It’s utterly characteristic of Mackenzie that he selects two points out of many made by Chambers, one frivolous, one serious, to finish his chapter. The serious one is that the castle is not taken. A strong guard is placed at the head of the West Bow to cut off all communication – *cha mhò*, adds Mackenzie, *leigeadh iad biadh no deoch a dh’ionnsaidh nan saighdearan, a bha chòmhnaidh ann*. “Nor would they permit the soldiers who lived there to be supplied with food or drink.”

The frivolous one is about a citizen who goes for a stroll round the walls on the morning of Tuesday 17 September, unaware that anything has happened during the night. He finds “a mountaineer sitting astride upon a cannon, with an air of great vigilance and solemnity, as if deeply impressed with a sense of his duty as a sentinel”. This becomes *fear de na Gàeil 'na shuidhe casa-gobhlach air aon dheth na gunnaidhean mòra agus a chlaidheamh rùiste na dhòrn* (“. . . with his sword unsheathed in his fist”).

“Surely,” says the citizen, “these are not the same troops which mounted guard yesterday?” Mackenzie repeats this, the first English words in his book.

“Och, no,” says the Highlander, “she pe relieved.” Or as Mackenzie puts it: “O! no, she 's pe relieved.”

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