

Charlie's Year (6)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

SO FAR in this series we've followed Prince Charles from France to Eriskay, Moidart and now Edinburgh in the words of Robert Chambers (writing in English in 1840) and of John Mackenzie (in his Gaelic "translation" of Chambers, 1844). But nowhere does the difference between Chambers as an Edinburgh Borderer and Mackenzie as a Glasgow Gael show up so starkly as in the description of Charles's approach to Edinburgh.

It was Tuesday 17 September 1745, and Charles and his army were camped at Slateford. Edinburgh had been captured by a small detachment early that morning, but the Castle remained in enemy hands, and Charles's route was determined by the need to avoid its guns. "Debouching upon the open or turnpike road, near Morningside, and turning towards the city," says Chambers, "he reached a sequestered and almost obsolete cross-road, which turns off to the east by the house of Grange, and completely precludes the view of the city or castle."

This will be Grange Loan. "Charles conducted his army along this road, and, soon after passing through the Causewayside and Newington, entered the King's Park near Priestfield, by a breach which had been made in the wall."

It's only at this point that Mackenzie begins to cite place-names, using a Gaelic term for "King's Park" which, incredibly, is still used in Edinburgh today, denoting not the entire park however but a spot beside Holyrood Palace where, presumably, the royal home farm once lay. *Mhàrsail iad air an t-shlighe so gus an tàinig iad a steach do Chroit-an-Rìgh fagus do dh-Iomair' an t-Sagairt, air bearn a thug iad air a bhalla.*

"Leaving his troops about noon in the Hunter's Bog, a deep and sheltered valley betwixt Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags, he rode forward." *Stad a' mhòr-fheachd ma thra-nòine ann an Bog-an-t-sealgair, gleannan domhain fasgathach a tha eadar Cathair-Airt a's Creaganan Shalus-bòrgh.*

Personally I've always called Arthur's Seat *Suidh' Artair*, so my daughters know it as that. But I like the sound of *Cathair-Airt*, and I know where Mackenzie is getting it. He will have made his "translation" at his lodgings at 25 East Clyde Street in Glasgow and in the neighbouring hostelry run by Artt McLachlan (from Luing) at 76 Great Clyde Street. McLachlan, whom Mackenzie calls Art Mac-Lachuinn, was a patriotic Gael and a good friend whose beer Mackenzie celebrates in a splendid poem of seven stanzas. I've made an English translation of it and hope to publish it soon.

Anyway, followed quite faithfully by Mackenzie, Chambers describes how Charles rode to his palace from St Anthony's Well, watched by an admiring crowd. It's a spot associated in my own mind with the annual miners' gala addressed by Mick McGahey; through the trees is the back of the old Elsie Inglis Hospital where my daughter Catriona was born. Chambers chooses this point to describe the Prince, and includes the remark: "By all ladies who ever saw him, his person was excessively admired."

This sets Mackenzie off. Ignoring the rest of Chambers's description, he writes (I translate): "The Prince was indeed *leannan nam ban àluinn* ('the darling of lovely women'), as Silis bhàn na Ceapaich said of Alasdair dubh of Glengarry." He had published these words in an anthology a couple of years before. Come to think of it, so have I.

He goes on: "No lady who set eyes on him failed to confess that he was as handsome a figure (*fiùran*) as they had ever seen. Young girls who had sweethearts around that time swore that they would not have them in wedlock (*le còir bho'n Chléir*), or in any other way, unless they first went to display their devotion, as well as proving their valour in the battlefield, with young Charles Stuart."

Mackenzie was right to pick and choose, for Chambers now produces one of the racist slurs which disfigure his book. Citing "a violent party production" called "History of the

Rise, Progress, and Extinction of the Rebellion in Scotland”, he says (not in quotation marks), “Around him, as he rode, there was a small guard of ancient Highlanders, whose outlandish and sun-burnt faces, as they were occasionally turned up with reverence towards the Prince, and occasionally cast with an air of stupid wonder over the crowd, formed not the least striking feature in this singular scene.”

Mackenzie translates only as far as “Highlanders”. *Bha air gach taobh dheth mar bha e triall geard dubailt dheth na Gàeil bu sheine 'bha san fheachd.*

Next, Chambers treats us to a passage about how the people of Edinburgh began to see the Prince in a different light. “Many had previously conceived Charles to be only the leader of a band of predatory barbarians, at open warfare with property . . .” The trouble for Mackenzie is that although Chambers explains how *Charles* was more interesting than expected, the stereotype of his army is left unqualified. So Mackenzie balances the picture. First the stereotype: *pràbar doirbh, aineolach, gun iochd, gun treocair, gun eagal Dhia no dhaoine . . . àmhlaran mì-chuanda, gun chumadh gun eireachdas . . .* Then, much more briefly than in Chambers, the “interesting” Charles: *Na ghallan òg maiseach, a theich a dùthaich choigrich agus a thilg e-féin ann an uchd nan ursannan-catha bu dion da shinnsir bho shean an àm gàbhaidh . . .*

Then, at length, the corrected stereotype, which, far from being the *translation* of Chambers which Mackenzie’s Edinburgh publisher had asked for, is in fact a *response* to him: *laochraidh sgiamhach, cholgail, choganta, leis nach bu diù cromadh an cuid chàich gun dioladh air a shon: agus mar a thubhairt sean Oisian “leis bu ghràin an lann a thruailleadh ann am fuil nam fann” – “Laoich mar osag an iuchair ri dàimh, 's mar lasair theine ri nàimh.”* (“Handsome, heroic, warlike heroes, who did not deign to touch the property of others without paying for it, and, as Ossian said, ‘who were loth to pollute the sword with the blood of the weak’ – ‘Warriors who were to poets like a summer breeze, and to the foe like a fiery flame.’”)

Chambers mentions that the ancestors of the people of Edinburgh had fought with Charles’s forebears at Bannockburn and Flodden, and ends by saying that while “the boot of Charles was dimmed, as he passed along, with kisses and with tears”, those who watched George IV at the self-same spot in 1822 saw him as “the chief magistrate of the nation”. For his part, Mackenzie ends by describing the Gael as *siol nan treun a chog an aghaidh aintighearnas Shasuinn air son saoradh Alba, latha Allt-a-Bhonaich agus Raoin-Floden, &c. &c.*

Note “English tyranny”. Already in the 1840s, Chambers and Mackenzie are articulating two strands of political belief that are familiar today, New Labour and SNP. And that helps us understand the 1740s too. Culloden was a battle not between Scotland and England, but between those two parties.

First, however, the new regime had to establish its credentials, then Johnnie Cope must be dealt with. The heralds were secured, and King James was proclaimed at the Mercat Cross. Here Mackenzie seems to know things Chambers doesn’t. Chambers says the proclamation was read by “David Beatt, a Jacobite teacher of Edinburgh”. He would have done it willingly enough, I would have thought, but, says Mackenzie, *thugadh air maighstirsgoil a muinntir a’ bhaile, a bha de Chreideamh an t-Sagairt . . .*, a teacher from the town, who was a Catholic, was “made” to read the proclamation.

Describing the scene, Chambers mentions two things guaranteed to get Mackenzie going – beautiful women and piping. The Highlanders fired their guns in the air because, says Mackenzie, the women watching the ceremony from their windows in the High Street were loyally waving their handkerchiefs. Chambers particularly mentions Mrs Murray of Broughton (Peeblesshire), “whose enthusiasm was only surpassed by her beauty”. Mackenzie informs us that she was known as *Sgathan-maise na h-Alba* (“Scotland’s Mirror of beauty”).

Similarly, Chambers tells us simply that James’s name was greeted with a pibroch, but Mackenzie knows more: *Thòisich iad còladh air chuich a phuirt rioghail sin da’n ainm*

“*Fàilt’ a Phrionns’ òig.*” (“They began to play in concert that regal tune ‘The Prince’s Salute’.”) The first pipe band on record?

At that very moment Sir John Cope, Commander-in-Chief of government forces in Scotland, was landing the first of his troops at Dunbar. The operation took two full days. Chambers chooses this point to tell us – in words apparently written by David Hume – the hilarious story of how the dragoons had retreated before Charles’s army at Linlithgow, finally to join Cope at Dunbar. When they got to Leith “some unlucky boy” called out “that the Highlanders were approaching”. Mackenzie enjoys telling this. *Thugaibh na Gàeil!* they hear, and jump into their saddles.

“Come awa the Gael!” Funny to think of that story being told in Easter Road for a hundred years till it turned into: “Come awa the Hibs!”

Hume (if he it was) continues the story. “At Prestonpans the same alarm was repeated. The Philistines be upon thee, Sampson! They galloped to North Berwick . . .”

Philistines indeed. Mackenzie translates: *Na Gàeil! Na Gàeil!*

Hume: “The sheep and turkeys of North Berwick paid for this warlike disposition.” The mutton was on the table when the cry came again. “Their fear proved stronger than their hunger.” *Chaidh an t-eagal os-ceann an acrais.* Up into the saddle they went, then down again, understanding *gum bu mhios’ an t-eagal na ’n cogadh*, “that fear was worse than war”, so says Mackenzie at least.

The serious point of this story is fear. Fear was what won and lost the coming battle at Prestonpans. A young man called John Home brought Cope detailed intelligence on the Jacobite army. Cope thanked him profusely. Mackenzie skips all this, but one point about Home’s information is striking. “Most of them seemed to be strong, active, hardy men, though many were of an ordinary size, and, if clothed like Lowlanders, would appear inferior to the king’s troops. The Highland garb, he said, favoured them, as it showed their naked limbs, which were strong and muscular.”

That was what unnerved the redcoats. That was why the Highland dress was made illegal for civilians after Culloden. And that was why it was retained by the British Army.

Cope’s redcoats marched through East Lothian, drums rattling, fifes playing. It was a peaceful place, then as now. “The country people, long unaccustomed to war and arms, flocked from all quarters to see an army going to fight a battle in Lothian,” says Chambers. *Chruinnich muinntir na dùthch’ às gach ionad a dh’ fhaicinn na h-àrmailt a bha nise gu catha a chur air machair shìochail Loudai.*

The Jacobite camp was at Duddingston (*Diddingston*, as Mackenzie has it), concealed from the prying eyes of the Castle by the vast bulk of Arthur’s Seat. The Highland army took three good days of rest there before marching east to meet Cope. Meanwhile Chambers tells a long tale of two volunteer Hanoverian spies who were tempted by the delights of “a snug, thatched tavern” by the river at Musselburgh “kept by a cleanly old woman called Luckie F——, who was eminent for the excellence of her oysters and sherry”.

Captured and brought to Duddingston, they were interrogated by one of the stars of Mackenzie’s anthology (and mine), the poet-colonel John Roy Stewart. His conclusion, according to Chambers: “I am certain they are spies, at least this oldest one, and I propose that, to make sure, we should hang them baith.”

The sentence was never carried out, and, curiously, Mackenzie omits the story. Perhaps because he felt it reflected no credit on his hero.

The first files of Cope’s troops were between what are now Port Seton and Prestonpans when word came that the Jacobite army was in full march towards them. Cope, “thinking the plain which lay before him a very proper place to receive the enemy”, drew up his troops in a line stretching from Tranent to the sea, facing west.

It was the afternoon of Friday 20 September 1745.