

## Charlie's Year (7)

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHEN Robert Chambers reaches chapter 12 of his book “History of the Rebellion in Scotland in 1745-6”, written in 1840, he calls it “The Prince’s March to Preston”. When John Mackenzie is asked by an Edinburgh publisher in 1843 to translate Chambers’s work into Gaelic, he calls the same chapter (chapter 10 – he’s abridging furiously!) “Turas nan Gael gu Sliabh a Chlamhain”.

The March of the Gael to Gladsmuir. It speaks volumes.

The battle is known today in English as Prestonpans. It was fought on Saturday 21 September 1745. It has always been known in Gaelic as *Blàr Sliabh a' Chlamhain* for the simple reason that Thomas Rhymer, *Tómas Reumhair*, had prophesied: *Sann an sliabh a' chlamhain bhios an cath*. “In the hawk’s moor will the battle be.” I wrote about it on this page in a piece called “Gladsmuir That Glads Us All” on 27 March 1998.

It was well known to all Gaelic speakers that the battle would be fought under a great leader who would come across the sea, that it would set all things right in the kingdom, that it would bring the Gael back to their own. The prophecy had been used for decades by Jacobite propagandists, none more so than the poet Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair, who, as it happened, now found himself in the Jacobite camp at Duddingston, a captain in the regiment led by Young Clanranald, leading a company of Ardnamurchan men, many of whom were former pupils from his fifteen years of schoolmastering.

On the morning of Friday 20 September Cope’s army marched west from Haddington, Prince Charles’s east from Duddingston. There was actually a Gladsmuir on Cope’s route, just four miles west of Haddington on the post-road to Edinburgh (now the A1), and he avoided it. Our authors say nothing of prophecies, however. “After marching a very few miles,” says Chambers, “it occurred to him, that the defiles and enclosures near the road would, in case of an attack, prove unfavourable to the action of cavalry; and he resolved to adopt a less frequented and more open path.

“On coming to Huntington, therefore, he turned off to the right, and took what is called the *Low Road*, that is, the road which traverses the low country near the sea, passing by St Germans and Seton.”

On the other hand, after crossing the Esk at Musselburgh the Prince’s army followed a route which could well have brought them to Gladsmuir – uphill to Inveresk, Newbigging and Pinkie. “Here Lord George Murray, who led the van, received intelligence that Cope was at or near Preston, and was likely to seek the high grounds to the south, so as to obtain an advantage over the Highland army.”

Mackenzie’s “translation” shows awareness of only one place-name. *Cha b' fhad a chaidh iad air an aghaidh, 'nuair a thachair fear-siubhail riu a dh'innis daibh gun robh an t-àrm-dearg air Sliabh a' Chlamhain agus a' gleidheadh cothrom na bruthach air taobh deas an t-Slèibhe*. “They had not proceeded far when they met a traveller who told them that the red army was on Gladsmuir winning the advantage of the high ground to the south of the Muir.”

The fact that Gladsmuir lies a full five miles east of the old village of Preston, with Tranent and Macmerry in between, meant nothing to Mackenzie. He was a Glasgow Gael anyway. *Sliabh a' Chlamhain* had been the Gaelic name of the battle ever since it was fought, *Sliabh a' Chlamhain* it must be. Even when translating Preston (which should have been *Bail' an t-Sagairt*, I suppose).

Lord George was “convinced that the Highlanders could do nothing unless they got above the enemy”. He led the army in a quick march uphill to Fawside (Mackenzie’s *an Fhasaid*). Then, seeing Cope’s forces drawn up at Preston, occupying the ground down to the sea at Prestonpans, he “commenced a slanting march down hill towards Tranent”.

When Cope saw the Jacobites approaching from the south he turned his army round to face them. Behind the redcoats now was the shore at Cockenzie. To their right was the intricate little village of Preston with its parks and garden walls, still there today. To their left was Seton House. And, crucially, facing their front was a morass. *Sùilean-crithich*, as Mackenzie calls it. A deep drain had been cut along its length from west to east, pretty much where the A1 and the railway run now. Yes, the London train runs through the battlefield, marking the line of battle.

It was a good defensive position. If the Highland army charged downhill, they would flounder in the bog and be mown down. But it was midday and they could see that for themselves.

The armies were evenly matched. Chambers describes in detail their wheeling and counter-marching during the rest of the day, and eventually says: “As soon as it became dark, the Highland army moved from the west to the east side of Tranent, where the morass seemed to be more practicable.” *Cho luath sa’ chiaraich an òidhche, ghluais na Gàeil gu taobh na h-airde ’n iar far an robh iad an dùil a b’ fhasa dhaibh a dhol thar a’ bhoglaich.*

Spot the difference. Inside information? No, Mackenzie must have been in his local in Clyde Sreet when he translated that bit, because in his next paragraph he gets the date of the battle wrong as well (*an dara latha tha fhichead de dhara mìos an Fhoghair*).

On the other hand there is a real difference between the two men’s accounts of how, or rather when, the Highland army got the intelligence that led them by a little-known path through the bog during the night. Chambers tells how a local man in the Prince’s army, Robert Anderson, gave this information to James Hepburn of Keith, who sent him to Lord George “whom he found asleep in a field of cut peas”, who woke Charles, who “sat up on his bed of peas-straw, and listened to the scheme with great attention”. The army then moved at 3 a.m., three hours before dawn.

Mackenzie’s account *begins* at 3 a.m. He says that the army was already on the move when Anderson passed on his information. It sounds to me as if he had his own sources, who only knew that the ordinary squaddies were not told about the change of plan until after 3 a.m.

Anderson led the way downhill and through the bog. The army followed three abreast. Even when daylight began to appear they were still enveloped in mist. They heard calls of “Who’s there?” and shots, then sounds of hooves as dragoon guards galloped back to raise the alarm. Surprise was no part of the Prince’s plan, says Chambers, but all things are relative.

Crossing the ditch was of course the worst bit. It was a mill-course at this easterly point, with a narrow wooden bridge. “Charles himself jumped across the dam, but fell on the other side, and got his legs and hands beslimed.”

Mackenzie omits this, but picks up Chambers’s next point, the arrangement of the Highland army once they had drawn up on the hard ground inside the redcoat “fortress”. The Clan Donald was put on the right wing according to a tradition established by Bruce at Bannockburn. Chambers says “it had assumed that station in every battle since, except that of Harlaw, on which occasion the post of honour was voluntarily resigned in favour of the MacLeods”. Intrigued, Mackenzie adds in square brackets (I translate): “The MacLeods had the right wing in that battle, what won them that honour I have not heard.”

When the army is drawn up Charles makes a little speech: “Follow me, gentlemen; and by the blessing of God, I will this day make you a free and happy people!” Mackenzie translates this, but I’m more interested in what follows. *Bha ’n ghrian mu’n àm so a’ nochdadh a’ gnùis san ear, agus bha ’n smùidean ceathaich a teicheadh ro’ fianais bharr lom an raoin gu ard an t-slèibhe; cha robh a nis’ eadar iad ’san t-arm-dearg ach iomaire còmhnard asbhuaìn, ach fathast, cha robh e cho soilleir ’s gu’m bu léir do’n dà armait a chéile.*

*Cha chluinnte facal no fuaim sam bith a measg nan Gàèl ach fathrum na connlaich fo bhonnabh an cas mar bha iad a' triall tro'n asbhuaire. Aig an arm-dhearg chluinnte drumas 'n dràsta 's a rithist, a thaobh gur h-ann le a bhasa stiùradh an àirm.*

When I first read this a long time ago I thought it was superb Gaelic writing. But that is because it is well translated – and well abridged – from superb English writing. “It was just dawn,” says Chambers, “and the mist was fast retiring before the advance of the sun, when the Highlanders set out upon their attack. A long uninterrupted series of fields, from which the grain had recently been reaped, lay between them and General Cope’s position. Morn was already on the waters of the Forth to their right, and the mist was rolling in large masses over the marsh and up the crofts to their left; but it was not yet clear enough to admit of either army seeing the other.

“An impervious darkness lay between, which was soon however to disclose to both the exciting spectacle of an armed and determined enemy. On the part of the Highlanders there was perfect silence, except the rushing sound occasioned by their feet going through the stubble: on that of General Cope, only an occasional drum was to be heard, as it hoarsely pronounced some military signal.”

If I were devising a translation course, I’d set that passage for dissection.

Mackenzie skips a lot of detail to bring us straight to the charge. Surprisingly, among the material he omits is a bit of Gaelic, a rarity in Chambers’s text. Just before the attack, says Chambers, the Prince is returning to his position between the lines and passes “a Highland gentleman, who wrote a journal of the campaign”. This we now know is Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair. Chambers says: “Recognising him, he [Charles] said, with a smile, ‘*Gres-ort, gres-ort!*’ – that is, ‘Make haste, make haste!’”

Alastair was Charles’s Gaelic tutor.

Through the thin sunny mist Cope sees “the dark clumps of the clans rushing swiftly and silently on towards his troops”. Chambers quotes a Whig historian, Andrew Henderson, as pointing out that when the sentries first saw the Highland line through the mist they “thought it a hedge which was gradually becoming apparent as the light increased”.

With the charge, Mackenzie’s method changes. Gaelic is replete with heroic imagery and it’s there to be used, so into his translation come quotes in inverted commas like “*ionad tharruinn lann*” (“the place for drawing blades”). A volley of musketry “went along the royal lines from right to left”, says Chambers, and Mackenzie clarifies: *chaidh làdach ghunnaidhean caola bho ceann gu ceann dheth an arm-dhearg ann an aodainn nan Gàèl*. “A volley of musketry went along the red army’s line into the faces of the Gael.”

Chambers: “But all was unavailing against the ferocious resolution of the Highlanders.” Mackenzie: *Ach cha tug sin air “na laoiich gun tioma, dhol á àite buille bhualadh.”* A quote – from poetry perhaps? “That didn’t make ‘the fearless warriors, retreat from the place for striking a blow’.”

Mackenzie now burrows back into Chambers’s earlier detail to turn a general description of Highland warfare into a specific account of how Prestonpans was won. Again he clarifies (he must have been out of the pub by now). Chambers says that the Highlanders fired “when within a musket-length of the object”, threw down their pieces and darted on through the smoke with sword, dirk and target in hand. Mackenzie: *’Nuair a thàinig iad an imisg dusan slat do’n arm-dhearg, leag gach fear urchair á ghunna agus thilg e bhuaidh i mar shlacan-ònaid gun mhath . . .* (“When they came near twelve yards from the red army, each man fired a shot from his gun and threw it away like a no-good silly woman’s clothes-mallet . . .”)

I like that. Next, both men explain how the Highlanders went down on their left knee and took the soldier’s bayonet thrust on their target. Raising it out of harm’s way, they went in with the sword and “killed him at one blow”, or as Mackenzie puts it with another quotation, “the redcoat was without breath”, *le aon bhuille dheth na chloidheamh-mhòr “bha ’n dearganach gu’n anail”*.

Chambers's generalised description ends: "The battle was thus decided in a moment, and all that followed was mere carnage." Mackenzie particularises: *Cha do chùm an t-arm-dearg an aghaidh ri cruadal ach ma chùig mionaidean.* ("The red army only kept their faces to the strife for about five minutes.") Wonderful word, *cruadal*.

Yes, five minutes was all it took. Four, by some accounts. Charles had won. Had Thomas's prophecy come true at last?

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