

Charlie's Year (8)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TWO weeks ago, in my double-sourced account of *Bliadhna Theàrlaich*, I reached the Battle of Prestonpans, which was fought on Saturday 21 September 1745.

It will be pretty clear by now what I am trying to do in this mini-series. At one level I'm comparing an account of the '45 written in English by Robert Chambers in 1840 with one written in Gaelic by John Mackenzie in 1844. The latter was supposed to be a translation of the former – we have the evidence of Mackenzie's contract with his publisher to prove it.

This exercise raises all sorts of issues about the nature of translation, about cultural hegemony, and about spin. These are the things which make it vital for us as a nation that Gaelic should survive and go from strength to strength. By "Gaelic" I mean a huge cultural and intellectual treasure-house, dimly lit and full of unexplored riches, to which the language is the only key – and some people would like to throw it away.

That's reason enough to support the Gaelic cause, but the same applies in different degrees to all the languages of Europe and of the world. Anyone who disapproves of lies and bullying, and anyone who believes that it's vital for the human race that we should all be able to see the other person's point of view, should be in favour of cultural diversity and universal – yes, universal – bilingualism.

That's one level. At another, this column is supposed to be about the calendar and Gaelic tradition. So I'm moving through *Bliadhna Theàrlaich* roughly at the pace of events, hoping that we'll get to the battle of Falkirk (17 January 1746) in January and to Culloden (16 April 1746) by April, that we'll spend the summer of 2004 wandering the Highlands and Islands as Charles did in 1746, and that we can wave him goodbye on or before 20 September, when he finally left our shores. That's the calendar – and John Mackenzie will supply most of the Gaelic tradition, if we can keep teasing it out of him, infuriating man that he was.

Chambers called his book "History of the Rebellion in Scotland in 1745-6"; Mackenzie called his "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" ("The Prince's Adventure"). This is odd, because it's Chambers who is obsessed with the Prince, and Mackenzie who, through his editing process, shines his torch clearly on the ordinary Gael who did the hard work and paid the high price. For example, Chambers's chapter 14, which I'll discuss next time, is called "Prince Charles at Holyrood", and this is "translated" by Mackenzie into chapter 12, "Na Gaeil ann an Duneideann an deigh a' Bhlair" ("The Highlanders in Edinburgh after the Battle")!

This is a perfect example of the "spin" I was talking about. It's a cultural issue, a language issue, and a big issue in the telling of history. Kings and queens – or ordinary people? I was watching a TV programme about the war against the Zulus the other night which showed that the way Queen Victoria bestowed honours was dictated entirely by the class system and in no way by bravery or competence.

In the same way, a seventeenth-century Uistman called Neil MacMhuirich wrote an account of the Montrose wars of the 1640s because, as he said himself, *do connairc me gan iomrágh air bioth ar Ghaoidhealaibh ag na sgrìobhnoiribh ata ag techt ar gnoidhibh na haimsire, an mhuinntir do rinne an tseirbhis uile*. "I saw that those who treated of the affairs of the time have made no mention at all of the Gael, the men who did all the service." And my reading of Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair's 'Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill' is that it's the first socialist poem in Gaelic, an allegory designed to remind us that the battles of the '45 were fought by ordinary working men.

Which brings us back to Prestonpans, because Alastair was there, leading a company of the pupils whom he had taught over the years in various schools in Ardnamurchan. I'm reminded of this by a remark about the Highland army quoted by Chambers: "They consist of an odd medley of grey-beards and no-beards – old men fit to drop into the grave, and

young boys whose swords are near equal to their weight, and I really believe more than their length.”

Mackenzie missed that out. Spin and counter-spin?

Followed by Mackenzie, Chambers tells of various things that happened, or didn't happen, during the victory over Cope at Prestonpans. “Lochiel had ordered his men to strike at the noses of the horses, as the best means of getting the better of their masters; but they never found a single opportunity of practising this ruse, the men having chosen to retreat while they were yet some yards distant.” Mackenzie gives Lochiel's order as direct speech, then footnotes it with a proverb:

*Buail am balach air a chàrbad,
Each, a's balgair, air an t-sròin.*

(“Hit the oaf on the jaw, / Horse and dog on the nose.”) A variant of this is given by Dwelly under both *balgair* and *carbad!* Mackenzie follows it with an accusation which is only partly justified by Chambers's text. Chambers says of Whitney's dragoons: “Those dastards . . . wheeled about, and fled over the artillery guard, which was accordingly dispersed.” Mackenzie (I translate): “When they saw how fired up the tartan-plaided men were (*Nuair chunnaic iad gleòis luchd nam breacan*) they retreated in panic (*ghlac iad maoim*), so that they trampled their own infantry under their horses' hooves as they fled the battlefield.” He quotes a snatch of song which certainly isn't in Chambers:

*“Na coisichean, 's na marcaichean,
'S na b'aca shluagh gu léir,
Dol turraichean air tharraichean,
'S cha shealladh iad na'n déigh!!”*

(“The infantry and cavalry / And all the soldiers they had / Went scattering pell-mell / And wouldn't look behind them!”) Both writers describe how the redcoats threw down their guns to lighten their loads as they ran or begged for mercy on their knees, but curiously it's Mackenzie who chooses to underline the most outstanding exception to this abject behaviour – Colonel Gardiner, on whose property the battle was being fought. He rallies some men, who “only fled when they had suffered considerably, and when their brave leader was cut down by numerous wounds” having “behaved with the greatest fortitude, making more than one of the insurgents fall around him”.

So says Chambers, but Mackenzie is even more fulsome: “There fell that brave gentleman (*an t-uasal treun sin*) who led them in battle. Not, however, before he had left a good many of his enemies dead on each side of him, though he was in bad health and newly risen from sickness.”

There were some cowards in the Prince's army – the Lowland tenantry of the duke of Perth's regiment, of whom it was said that when they got near the enemy they “stood stock-still like oxen” – *stad iad ag amharc a bhlàir mar bhaide dhamh*. Mackenzie says this, but frets. He calls them *muinntir machair Alba* (“people of the Scottish lowlands”), then adds a footnote, which I translate: “Those whom I mean here are the Lowland Scots (*na Gall-Albannaich Mhachrach*) who were not Gaelic speakers.”

It seems to have struck him that some Gaelic speakers, like himself, live in the *machair* (lowlands), so he wants to be crystal clear that these are not the people he means.

Also in the duke's regiment, you see, was a party of MacGregors who had only “the blades of scythes fastened end-long upon poles”: *seann spealan le'n luirgnean air an dìreadh agus air an sàthadh ann an casan fad' innsinn*, says Mackenzie, who seems to know more about it. “Old scythes with their shafts (doesn't he mean *faobharan*, blades?) straightened and stuck into long ash handles.”

With these they rush forward and do horrible damage. Detached from their Lowland colleagues, they spy the MacGregor banner elsewhere on the field (it's green, Mackenzie tells us), exposing themselves to enemy fire in the process. Their leader, Malcolm MacGregor, falls with five bullets in his body, but props himself on his elbow and shouts: "Look ye, my lads, I'm not dead – by G—, I shall see if any of you does not do his duty!" Mackenzie omits the oath. *'Seallaibhse so Fhearabh, cha 'n eil mi màrbh fathast, – chì mise mar a deann na h-uill fear-agaibh an diugh a dhleasanas!*

The two authors agree on statistics. The battle is over in four minutes. The Jacobites suffer thirty dead and "about seventy or eighty" (*bho thri gu ceithir fichead*) wounded. On the government side 400 infantry are killed, 700 taken prisoner, 170 escape. Cope gets away with 400 cavalry, and brings the news of his own defeat to Berwick – *Beruig a tuath* ("North Berwick") says Mackenzie, showing forgiveable ignorance of geography. I've often heard the same mistake myself!

The people of Edinburgh learn of the victory in dramatic fashion. Mackenzie either had his own source for this story, or liked it so much he told it with poetic licence. A Jacobite called Colquhoun Grant kills an officer, takes his horse, and pursues "a small party" of dragoons (*dusan thrùpairean*) all the way to the city. "Within an hour after the battle" (*Ma leth uair an deigh a bhlàir*) the townsfolk see the dragoons "galloping up their principal street" (*a' cuir tein' às na clachan a dol suas an t-sràid ard*). They get safely into the castle, the gate closes behind them, and when Grant arrives he defiantly "stuck into it his bloody poniard" (*sparr e a' chloidheamh air a cheann anns an chòmhlà*). A poniard is a small dagger, not a sword.

In the same way, another story concerns "a young Highlander scarcely formed" (*Gàèl eile nach robh ach ma shia-bliadhna diag a dh' aois*) who is presented to the Prince as having killed "fourteen of the enemy" (*tri diag dheth nan nàimhdean*). Chambers: "The Prince asked him if this was true?" Mackenzie: "*Am beil sud a thasa 'g innse dhomh fìor, gun do mharbh thusa tri-fir dhiag an dé air Sliabh a Chlamhain?*"

Chambers: "I do not know if I killed them, but I brought fourteen soldiers to the ground with my broadsword!" Mackenzie: "*Cha do rinn mi cus sealltain co dhiù a bha iad marbh no nach robh, ach tha fios agam air a so, co dhiù, gun chuir mi tri-diag diù ri talamh le 'm chloidheamh.*"

Clearly Mackenzie has heard the figure was thirteen, not fourteen, and he's sticking to it. What's more, unlike Chambers he has the Prince's reply, which I translate: "My brave hero, that's what I wanted, well have you earned your day's pay, and if I am spared (*ma bhios mise fada beò*) you will receive that."

Chambers has much to say about the aftermath. "The wounded of the royal army were treated by their conquerors with a degree of humanity which might have been well imitated by the regular troops on a subsequent occasion."

He cites specific examples, some from the journal which we now know was written by Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair himself, for example: "I saw a Highlander carefully, and with patient kindness, carry a poor wounded soldier on his back into a house, where he left him, with a sixpence to pay his charges."

This is a curiosity. I also have the original text before me. It was in English, and what Alastair actually wrote was not "carefully, and with patient kindness, carry a poor wounded soldier on his back" but "supporting a poor wounded soldier by the arms till he should ease nature, and afterwards carry him on his back"!

There were things you could mention in the eighteenth century which you couldn't in the nineteenth.

Mackenzie misses out this anecdote, being content to make the point more briefly. He gives just as much space to what he calls *glanadh na h-àraich* ("cleansing the battlefield"), what Chambers calls "investing themselves with the spoils of the slain and wounded" and "ransacking the house of Colonel Gardiner".

Chambers, and Chambers only, speaks of “rough old Highlanders” wearing the fine shirts of redcoat officers over their clothes, and little boys “strutting about with large gold-laced cocked hats on their heads”. Both authors tell a story about a man who helps himself to a watch, but Mackenzie knows more about it: the man was from Barra, he says, it was a gold watch, and he got it by felling an English trooper with a single blow of his sword. He sold it to “some person for a trifle”, says Chambers, *r’a chompanach-leap’ air an ath mhadainn air son daga* (“his bedfellow next morning for a pistol”), says Mackenzie.

But the punchline is the same. The man didn’t know the thing had to be wound up, and was glad to be rid of it, “for it had died last night”. *Bhàsaich e ’n raoir!*

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