

Charlie's Year (12)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW years ago on this page I told the story of how Prince Charles's army spent Christmas Day 1745. They were trudging sadly into Glasgow (where they were not popular) after their long march to Derby and back.

My purpose at the time was to consider Thomas the Rhymer's alleged prophecy that the Gael would come into his own again after a great battle which would make the Clyde flow red with blood. They would be led by "a bastard from out of the west". You can imagine the trouble the Jacobite propaganda machine had spinning the "bastard" bit. No such battle took place, but it kept the Glasgow folk on edge.

In our step-by-step comparison of the 1840 edition of Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745-6" with John Mackenzie's "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844, which was supposed to be a translation of it, it's still only 8 November, and the troops have just crossed the border into England, so we've fallen behind the calendar a bit. No doubt we'll have caught up by the time we get to Culloden in April. But in any case, remember that eleven days were dropped when the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1752, and there have been further changes since, so in terms of weather and climate, the army's 8 November was our 19-21 November, and their Christmas Day was our 5-7 January.

Their first challenge over the border was Carlisle. The city hadn't been expecting them, but was protected by a castle and a wall. Dilapidated, but a wall nevertheless. The siege was delayed by news that Wade was marching his army west from Newcastle. The Prince turned east to meet him, but it was a false alarm. Wade, who had spent his career building roads and bridges, was 72 and getting too old to use them. When he finally began his march on 16 November, he was turned back by a fall of snow.

Mackenzie's description of the siege differs from Chambers's in point of detail. This is how Chambers describes the materials used: "Having prepared a quantity of ladders, fascines, and carriages, out of the wood in Corby and Warwick parks, the besieging party reappeared in full force before the city, on the afternoon of the 13th, and broke ground for a battery within forty fathoms of the walls, the Duke of Perth and Lord George Murray working in the trenches without their coats, in order to encourage the troops."

Mackenzie's rendering of this conveys a strong impression that whoever told him about the siege had spent it on turf-cutting duty. I translate. "After they had cut plenty of wood for ladders in Corby Wood (*Coille-Chorbaidh*) and cut a great deal of turf (*mòran fàil*) in Warwick parks (*pàirceachan Uaruig*), they carried that wood and turf (*am fiodh agus am fàil sin*) in front of the city on the 13th, and began building a fortress of stone and turf (*dùn cloiche 's fàil*), what the Lowlanders call a 'Battery' (*Bateri*), to bring the big guns within firing distance (*an àite teine*) of the city wall.

"They built these fortresses (*na dùin so*) almost forty fathoms (*an imisg dà-fhichead aitheamh*) from the wall. The Duke of Perth and Lord George worked in their shirt sleeves in the ditch (*às an léintean 'san dìge*) cutting turf and lifting stones (*a' gearradh fàil agus a' togail chlach*), in order to encourage the men."

The surrender itself is expressed in subtly different ways. In Chambers, the white flag goes up at the first assault because the garrison is "intimidated by the formidable appearance of the enemy's works" and "fatigued . . . by several nights of ceaseless watching". In Mackenzie an extra statement is thrown in: *Lean na Gàel mar so air cladhach, 's air bùrach, 's air togail an dùin gu solus na h-ath mhaidne*. "In this way the Highlanders continued digging, scraping, and building the battery till dawn next morning."

When the townspeople saw the work that *na fir ghasta* ("the excellent men") had done, says Mackenzie, and in such a short time, and as soon as they saw the Highlanders fixing the

big guns on the emplacements (*cho luath sa' chunnaic iad na Gàèil a' socrachadh nan gunnaidhean mòra air na sorrachanan*, another Mackenzie touch), up went the white flag.

War is work. It reminds me of “Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill”, which to me is both an allegory of the '45 and the first socialist poem in Gaelic. It portrays in detail the crew that pulled the ship's oars and hauled her lines. After Culloden the people who had done the work were the biggest losers. But had this march south been successful, who would have been the winners?

Prince Charles was at Brampton to the east. (Mackenzie calls it *Branton* and *Brunton*.) A messenger was sent to find out what terms he was willing to grant. Remembering his difficulties in Edinburgh, where the city was occupied but the castle remained in enemy hands, he “would assign no terms for the city”, says Chambers, “unless the castle were included”. It's left to Mackenzie to spell out the consequences. “He sent word that they should accept neither terms nor tribute (*gun iad a ghabhail cumha na cìs*), but send the town up in blazing smoke (*smùid dearg a chuir ris a' bhaile*), unless the garrison surrendered and the occupying troops gave up their arms.”

So, on 15 November, Carlisle was taken, and, in a reference to the gruesome vengeance exacted after Culloden by the Hanoverian government, Chambers says, “Many a brave man passed with a rejoicing heart beneath the arches over which his head was hereafter to be stationed in dismal sentinelship.” Mackenzie: *Is iomadh laoch treun a chaidh a steach le gàirdeachas do'n astail so anns an robh fa-dheoigh an cuid ceann air a chàradh mar shùlachan air stob*. What he means by *astail* I don't know (not “arches”, I think); *sùlachan* is his Ross-shire word for a warning, not a sentinel.

Chambers tells us a great deal at this point about uncertainty and quarrelling in the army. Lord George Murray resigned as lieutenant-general, which caused dismay among the troops, and he was reinstated. Mackenzie omits this, concentrating instead on a description of the forces being gathered to face them. The Prince's council considered three options: attack Wade, retreat to Scotland, or march south. Lord George said that if the Prince “chose to make a trial of what could be done” by marching south, his army would follow him. But, using stronger language than Chambers, Mackenzie tells us that the Highlanders, though courageous, felt that it was madness – *na ghnìomh cuthaich* – to attack a force as strong as the one facing them in Staffordshire.

At this point Mackenzie deviates from Chambers in a curious way. Chambers tells us that Edinburgh had returned under Whig domination, and that at Dundee and Perth, where large numbers of Jacobite troops were stationed, “there had been outbreaks of popular feeling in behalf of the government”. Mackenzie: “Many who had rallied to his cause (*a bh' air éirich leis*) in Edinburgh, Perth and Dundee had changed their minds, and forsaken his banner.” Carelessness? Inside information? Or another interpretation?

Anyway, in a welter of muddled dates and extra information on distances, Mackenzie follows Chambers's account of how the army marches on to Penrith and over Shap. “To encourage his men, Charles generally went on foot (*gun each gun ghille*, says Mackenzie, ‘without horse or servant’) beside them. As he passed over the desolate tract between Penrith and Shap, he was so much overcome by fatigue and want of sleep, that he found it necessary to take hold of one of the clan Ogilvie by the shoulder-belt to prevent him from falling; and he thus walked several miles half asleep.”

Mackenzie calls Prince Charlie's pillow simply *fear dheth na daoine*, “one of the men”.

As the army marches south through Lancashire, Chambers naturally turns to a description of the effect they had on the population. “Their political object seemed to excite no sympathy; their uncouth dress, language, and habits, spread terror before their march. It is credibly affirmed that many of the women hid their children at their approach, under an impression that they were cannibals, fond in particular of the flesh of infants.”

We've noticed Mackenzie saying more than Chambers when there's a chance of adding to the glory of the Gael, but he says less when it can only embarrass them, so he stops short

of mentioning cannibalism. Chambers, on the other hand, throws in an anecdote about how Cameron of Lochiel entered the lodgings assigned to him one night and his landlady begged him to take her life, but spare her two little children. When Lochiel told her he had no intention of hurting anybody, she looked at him in surprise, opened a cupboard and said: "Come out, children, the gentleman will not eat you."

Perhaps this other anecdote of Chambers's will help us understand. In a letter published in the papers, a man in Derby expressed his disgust at the ferocity and filthiness of the Highland troops, then said he was amused to see them take off their bonnets before eating, assume a reverent air, and say a grace "as if they had been Christians".

That one doesn't make it into Mackenzie's translation either, but he gives his full stamp of approval to a third anecdote, which could have been straight out of a *sgèulachd*. It has the Prince getting a hole in his shoe on the long march through Lancashire, so he goes into a smithy and gets the blacksmith to make a thin plate of iron and fix it to the bottom of the sole. He pays him and says, *So dhut do dhuais a laochain, agus a's math a choisinn thu i, agus faodaidh tu nise ràdh gu dearbh, gur tu féin a chiad ghobha riabh a chuir cruithean air mac Rìgh!* "Here's your reward my lad, and well have you earned it, and now you can say in truth, that you are the first blacksmith who ever shod a King's son!"

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