

Charlie's Year (13): The Road to Derby

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

FRIDAY 9 January 2004 is a turning-point for the Gaelic language, the deadline for responses to the Executive's draft Gaelic bill.

On some other page you'll find how to send them your views at the last minute. I can't use the word "h-----c" because I'm not a historian, but there's never been any other moment when a government in Scotland has turned to the people and said, "Do you want to keep the Gaelic language or not? Tell us, and we'll try and help you do something about it."

I see it as a re-run of the 1997 referendum. Then, the questions were: Do you want a Scottish parliament? Do you want it to have tax-raising powers? Now the questions are: Do you want the Gaelic language? Do you want the Gaelic bill to have teeth?

Like it or not, there's a numbers game going on, and those in Gaelic-speaking areas who don't send in a view at all will be regarded by the Executive as No-Nos.

I always write on this page about the past, but it's because I'm concerned about the present and the future, and I worry a lot about the breaking of links between the three. Big-language monolingualism and cultural bullying appal me. The lack of understanding between capitalism and communism was bad enough, now the gulf between global capitalism and Islam is even more dangerous. I've been reading a fascinating new book by a Canadian, Mark Abley, "Spoken Here: Travels among Threatened Languages", and he says in one place: "To the ambitious, the rebellious, the curious, the disaffected – to the young, in a word – dominant cultures hold a magnetic power."

He goes on: "In Canada attrition, not repression, accounts for the disappearance of Scottish Gaelic from the Ottawa Valley, the Eastern Townships of Quebec, and most of the areas in the Maritime provinces where settlers used to speak it every day. Little by little, child by child, Gaelic froze on their lips. Warfare reduced the Hurons from a powerful nation to a mere remnant – a few thousand people living on the outskirts of Quebec City – but attrition led them to forsake the Huron language. The last elders to speak it died early in the twentieth century. To converse with Huron people today, you need to use French. In French Max Gros-Louis, a former chief of the Hurons, once told me: 'We are a nation that doesn't have a language. This is almost shameful. It would be a matter of pride to take our language back.'"

My main purpose in comparing Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" (1840) with John Mackenzie's "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" (1844), which was supposed to be a translation of it, has been to explore issues like that. To what extent does the big culture bully, subvert or misrepresent the small one? To what extent is the Gaelic language needed to represent the truth about Gaelic-speaking people? Can the Gaelic writer be his own worst enemy? Does every language pursue its own agenda? Are the sources for any story a prism, which distorts differently depending on how you look through it? Don't we need as many relevant languages as possible?

Mackenzie's "translation" is a reminder that official bilingualism, all the way from road signs to examination papers, must be handled sensitively. Gaelic should never be a slavish translation of English; where such translation is intended, Gaelic should be represented in decision-making from the start; sometimes information conveyed in the two languages should be allowed to differ; Gaelic will be as precise as any other language, however, and in many respects (especially where nouns and adjectives are concerned, thanks to sophisticated use of gender and case) it will be more precise than English.

In the story of the Highland army's march south through Lancashire in November 1745 we have double culture-clash – not just sources in different languages, but also the meeting of two peoples. "Every where there was great surprise," says Chambers, "that these men, so far from acting like savage robbers, expressed a polite gratitude for what refreshments were

given them.” Mackenzie echoes this. *Anns gach àite anns an robh iad a dol a steach bha’n luchd-àitichidh a’ gabhail iongantais nach robh iad a stad agus a spùileadh gach bùth a bha ri taobh na slighe air an robh iad a’ falbh, agus cha’n robh an iongnadh idir na bu lugha ’nuair a chunnaic iad gu’n robh na Gàeil cho taingeil air son gach caoimhneas a bhasa taisbeanadh dhaibh.*

Chambers, the Borderer, now discusses the Highland army’s diet. This gives Mackenzie a problem, because his readers already know a lot more about the subject than Chambers ever will. “The Highlanders every day began their painful march before daybreak,” says Chambers, “with no provisions but what they carried in the shape of oat-meal, in a long bag by their sides, and which they never cooked but merely mixed before eating with a canteen full of cold water; trusting for any variety in this simple cheer to the accident of a bullock killed for their use, or to the hospitality of their landlords at night.”

Mackenzie’s rendering goes (I translate): “On this painful and exhausting march (*turas sgìth àngharach*), the Highlanders rose before daybreak, with no provisions (*teachd-an-tìr*) but a little oatmeal which every man carried on his back (*air a mhuin*) in a little canvas bag, and of which they made neither porridge (*lite*), gruel (*brochan*), or bread, but *stapag*, or as some say *fuarag*, with cold water from a puddle (*air uisge fuar an lodain*), from the side of the road – that was their most usual food, but sometimes they got a meal (*biatachd*) in the houses where they put up (*anns an robh iad a’ cur suas*) at night.”

Chambers: “The English were amazed to find that men could, upon this fare, walk from twenty to thirty miles in a winter day, exposed to bitter cold and tempestuous weather, with what appeared to them imperfect clothing, or rather rags; and that, though generally housed some hours after sunset, they invariably rose very early to prosecute their march, taking advantage of the moonlight, which then shone in the mornings before day-break.”

Mackenzie: “The English were amazed that men who lived on such poor fare (*bha tighinn beò air beatha cho suarach so*) were able to walk from twenty to thirty miles in the cold winter’s day, at the mercy of every storm and bad weather (*fo mheachainn gach sion a’s doirinn*), with naked thighs (*sléisnean rùiste*), and though housed (*fo fhasgath taighe*) for a few hours each night, they were always up before daybreak (*roi’ ghuth an eoin*, ‘before the bird’s voice’), taking advantage of the moonlight at night’s end.”

When the army reached Preston its fortunes took a turn for the better. The bells rang out – probably, says Chambers but not Mackenzie, thanks to the number of Catholics in the town – and a Catholic gentleman called Townley joined their ranks, the most prominent Englishman to rally to the cause.

The army had a superstitious dread of Preston, because it was the farthest into England the Jacobites had reached in 1715. To dispel this, says Chambers, Lord George Murray promptly crossed the Ribble and quartered some of his men on the other side. Mackenzie tells this without censorship, using strong words: *drid-fhortan* (“misfortune”), *geasan* (“taboos”).

They advanced to Wigan on the 28th, and Manchester on the 29th. Chambers tells a fascinating story about Manchester which Mackenzie omits, presumably for the simple reason that his book is a condensation and he wants to concentrate on the Gael. It concerns “one Dickson, a serjeant enlisted into the Highland army from the prisoners taken at Prestonpans”. Were I making a film about the ’45 I’d save this part for Michael Caine. Totally against orders, Dickson got more than a day’s march ahead of the rest, and entered Manchester on the morning of the 28th “attended by his mistress and a drummer”.

Within an hour of his arrival he started beating up for recruits, claiming the army was just behind him. Unfortunately it wasn’t, and his story began to wear thin. Surrounded by a mob, he levelled his blunderbuss and circled slowly, threatening to blow out the brains of anyone who laid a finger on himself or his two companions.

The circle got bigger and bigger. Meanwhile the Jacobite party in the town flew to arms, and over five hundred men are said to have come to his aid. They dispersed the crowd

quickly – to the Rover’s Return, no doubt. Dickson recruited as many of his saviours as he could, and paraded up and down with them till the advance guard of the Jacobite cavalry arrived at 9 p.m., to be followed next day by the rest of the army.

A Manchester Regiment was duly created, consisting of 300 men, with Townley at their head, and on the evening of the 30th, “illuminations . . . took place, bonfires were made, and the bells rung joyfully”, or as Mackenzie puts it, *ma chiaradh na h-òidhche chaidh na teineachan-aighear . . . ’nan caoirean dearga agus thòisich cluig a’ bhaile air séirm*.

It was a fund-raising event! The purpose was to raise tax and extract public money from anyone who held it. It had no effect until a “peremptory demand” (Chambers) or a “second summons” (*ath bhairlinn*, Mackenzie) went out.

On 1 December the army left Manchester. The Mersey bridges had been broken. “The Prince . . . crossed at Stockport, having the water up to his middle.” Lord George’s division took the road to Knutsford, where, says Chambers, “a temporary bridge was made of the trunks of poplar trees, laid lengthways, with planks across. The horse and artillery passed at Cheadleford.”

Mackenzie’s account of the crossing of what he calls the *Mercy* is different, but it’s hard to know why. “A wood of aspen (*coille chrithinn*) beside the river was cut down and a sort of bridge made of the trees, over which passed the horses, cannon and all other military equipment.”

At Macclesfield that evening, the Jacobites heard that the Duke of Cumberland had arrived in Staffordshire to take personal charge of the army that faced them on the road to London. It was decided that the Prince’s column should march to Derby; meanwhile Murray conducted a brilliant manoeuvre. On the night of 2 December he marched straight towards a detachment of Cumberland’s cavalry at Newcastle-under-Lyne, “whence the dragoons broke up with great precipitation, some of them escaping through windows”. Then he side-stepped, joining the Prince at Derby on the 4th.

Both accounts are peppered with place-names at this point; Mackenzie gives them unaltered, except for *Maccleshfield* and *Allt-Innsinn* (Ashbourn). The main points are these: the Jacobites had got past the Redcoats; Cumberland, King George’s son, had been humiliated; as Chambers now makes clear, and as Mackenzie emphasises, thanks to Murray, Charles’s army was now just six score miles from London.

Nine miles closer than Cumberland’s.

9 January 2004