

## Charlie's Year (14): The Turning Point

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

One step forward, two steps back. Two steps this way, one step that.

In the foul weather of November and December 1745 Prince Charles's army performed an exquisite minuet with the redcoats. Back and forth across the counties of England, hands to hips, seldom touching each other but for the tantalising swish of a skirt.

The Gael had reached Derby. It was 4 December and they were just 127 miles from London. They had easily sidestepped General Wade's army at Newcastle; now he was marching south through Yorkshire, reaching Wetherby on the 4th. They had even got past the Duke of Cumberland, who thought he had placed his forces square across their path. "There remained yet a third army at Finchley Common," says Robert Chambers in his "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" (1840), "but it was not formidable in character or numbers, and probably might have failed to meet the clans in battle, if they had marched still onward."

In his "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844, which was supposed to be a translation of Chambers's work, John Mackenzie doesn't tell us about the army at Finchley, because he's obliged to make cuts to save space, and wants to concentrate on telling the story from the point of view of the ordinary Highland soldier. But Chambers has a very interesting passage at this point which is based on close reading of the newspapers of the day. The Highland army was invariably spoken of with contempt, "both on physical and moral grounds", he explains. The Prince's enterprise was regarded as "a rather odd piece of mob-procedure" which a proper exercise of regular military force would put down.

It was even regarded as a novel kind of show. The poet Thomas Gray, he of the "Elegy in a Country Churchyard", wrote from Cambridge: "Here we had no more sense of danger than if it were the battle of Cannæ. I heard three sensible middle-aged men . . . talking of hiring a chaise to go to Caxton, a place on the high road, to see the Pretender and the Highlanders as they passed."

I can't recall feeling like that since I was a young man in 1968, when the radio was full of talk about the Falls Road and the Shankill and it seemed an attractive idea to go and look at these exotic-sounding streets full of drums and banners. But note the geography, if you please. Caxton is near the A1 and only fifty miles north of London. The men Gray overheard saw the Jacobites not as a military force but as a political crusade, like the Jarrow marchers on the same road in 1936. It didn't seem to occur to them that the Government might want to put a stop to it.

As Chambers points out, this attitude was a direct result of Government policy. "It was thought equivalent to a profession of Jacobitism, to speak in respectful terms of the chevalier, his followers, or the strength of his army." This policy dampened popular enthusiasm for Charles's cause, but also promoted a relaxed "business as usual" atmosphere which was, Chambers says, in the highest degree useful to Charles.

Relaxed? Not the Government, which panicked (and Mackenzie chooses this point to recommence his translation). When news reached London on Friday 6 December that the Jacobites had got past Cumberland's army and were in Derby, there was a run on the banks. One cabinet minister was said to have shut himself in his house for the day (Mackenzie doesn't bother with "was said to have"), deliberating whether to throw in his lot with the Stuarts. A group of London politicians, including an alderman called Heathcote, was expected to come out publicly in the Jacobite interest. King George was said to have (Mackenzie doesn't bother with "was said to have") had his yachts ready at the Tower stairs, loaded with his most valuable effects and ready to sail for Hanover at a moment's notice. It was remembered as "Black Friday" – in Mackenzie's words, *Di-h-aoine dubh*.

Ironically, Chambers begins his chapter "Retreat to Scotland" with still more excellent news for the Jacobites. While at Derby the Prince got intelligence that a thousand Irish troops

in the French king's service had landed at Montrose – all in good order save for a few transports taken by “English cruisers”, says Chambers, *long bheag Shasunnach* (“a small English ship”), says Mackenzie. Ten thousand more troops were being mustered at Dunkirk, and Louis XV told Charles's younger brother that he would “dine quietly in London on the 9th of January”. This is clarified by Mackenzie – *gu'n gabhadh e dhinnear maille ris, le sìth a's sàmhchair* . . . “That he would dine with him, quietly . . .”

The Highland army at Derby could have known little of this. Even so, says Chambers, “The men in general were in high spirits, and very anxious to come to an engagement with the Duke of Cumberland's army. The common expectation was, that a battle was about to take place.” Mackenzie: *Bha 'n àrmailt gu léir ann an deagh mhisneach agus “mar choin air éill” air son a bhi gha 'n cumail bho thòiseachadh air feachd Dhiùc Uilleam; bha iad gu léir an dùil gun robh iad gu toiseachadh air am arm-dhearg ás a's ás*. So we see Mackenzie plucking an appropriate phrase (*mar choin air éill*, “like hounds on a leash”) from Gaelic poetry or *sgeulachd* to render Chambers's “in high spirits”.

The Prince was the same, “eager to go forward on his march at all hazards, but hopeful that succours from France and a rising of his English friends would make it less dangerous than it appeared” (Chambers); *air chath-chrith gu dhol air aghaidh le dòchas gun tugadh an fheachd Fhràngach coinneamh dhaibh faisg air Lunnainn* (Mackenzie). I wonder why Mackenzie omits the “English friends”.

But what happens? “At a council of war held on the morning of the 5th,” says Chambers, “Lord George Murray and the other members gave it as their unanimous opinion, that the army ought to return to Scotland. Lord George pointed out that they were about to be environed by three armies, amounting collectively to about 30,000 men, while their own forces were not above 5000, if so many. Supposing an unsuccessful engagement with any of those armies, it could not be expected that one man would escape, for the militia would beset every road. The Prince, if not slain in the battle, must fall into the enemy's hands.”

Mackenzie follows this pretty faithfully, with three exceptions. One, he weakens the unanimity of the decision, preferring to speak of *Morair Seòras Moireach agus a' chuid mhòr dheth na h-uaislean* (“Lord George Murray and most of the gentlemen”). This will be because Chambers goes on to explain that the Prince subsequently wins some members of the council over to his own preferred option of marching on to London, but that they refuse to put their view in writing; this is a little too long-winded for Mackenzie's abridgement. Secondly, Chambers's “to return to Scotland” becomes *a theicheadh gun dàil do dh'-Alba* (“to flee forthwith to Scotland”). Thirdly, the Prince's fate is expressed more strongly: “must fall into the enemy's hands” becomes *rachadh a' ghlacadh leis na nàimhdean agus a cheann a sgaradh gun tròcair dheth a mhuineal* (“he would be caught by the enemy and decapitated without mercy”).

The Prince “pressed with all the force of argument to go forward”, says Chambers, quoting Lord George Murray's memoirs. In Mackenzie's words this becomes *dh' aslaich e gu dion air na Fineachan iad a dhol air an aghaidh*: “he pleaded vehemently with the Clans to go forward”.

Chambers: “He was hopeful there might be a defection in the enemy's army, and that many would declare for him.” Mackenzie: *Thuir e gum faodadh gaoid a bhi anns an arm-dhearg a bheireadh air cuid dhiù éiridh leis-san*. (“He said there might be a defect in the red army that would make some of them join him.”)

*Gaoid?* It sounds as if Mackenzie may have misunderstood Chambers's word “defection”. In his English–Gaelic dictionary, published in 1845, Mackenzie gives *gaoid* as the last of six meanings of “defect”, while for “defection” he gives: *Easbhuidh, fàillneachadh; ceannairc*. Only the last of these three could mean “defection” nowadays. This misleading entry is repeated in the English–Gaelic section of Malcolm MacLennan's dictionary, which was plagiarised from Mackenzie's and is, to the publishers' disgrace, still on sale today.

When the Prince found he was losing the argument he proposed marching to Wales instead of Scotland, but that, too, was met with stony disagreement. “His chagrin, when he found his councillors obdurate,” says Chambers, “was beyond all bounds.” In Gaelic this becomes: “When Charles heard this, his heart’s anguish (*chràdh cridhe*) was so great that he did not utter a syllable (*smid*) to high or low for a quarter of an hour.”

Where did Mackenzie get that from? Clearly he had another source.

As Chambers now points out, Charles’s desperate-sounding idea of marching for Wales had something behind it. Until now the Jacobite party in England and Wales had held back, believing that his force was too small to succeed. Charles had “little or no communication of any kind” with them, or, as Mackenzie puts it, they avoided *comunn no còmhradh, a dh’ aon chuid, a bhi aca ris féin no ris na Gaëil*. But Charles’s feat of getting past Cumberland’s force had impressed them hugely. Chambers says of the English Jacobites: “Many were just on the point of declaring themselves and marching to join his army, when the retreat from Derby was determined on.”

As for the Welsh, the evidence is stronger still. Two days after the retreat from Derby began a messenger arrived in the town offering the assistance of Welsh friends of the cause. Chambers himself was told that the Welsh Jacobites were on the move by then, and boasted long afterwards of how far they had travelled, “a man who had gone fifty miles looking upon himself as twice as good a partisan as one who had gone only five-and-twenty, and so on”.

Mackenzie picks this up, explaining to his readers that Wales is *Gàeldachd Shasuinn*, and that many of these “English Gaels” had walked fifty miles to join Charles’s banner before they turned back on hearing of the retreat. He adds this passage of his own (I translate): “The *Welsich* and our *Gaëil* are branches (*meòir*) of the same tree, and with regard to hardihood, heroism and courage, they come nearest of all the people of the globe to the Scottish Gael in every exploit and manly deed. If they and the French had joined the Highland army, a different story would have to be told of ‘*Bliadhna Thearlaich*’ (Charlie’s Year).”

And why did the French fleet never cross the Channel? Because they, too, heard the news of the retreat from Derby.

**23 January 2004**