

Charlie's Year (16): The Long Road Home

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

OUR comparison between Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" of 1840 and John Mackenzie's "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844 has fallen well behind the calendar. We have to take up the story now on 6 December 1745. Whether we can still reach Culloden in April, I have no idea!

It was on Friday 6 December that the Highland army left Derby. The men were fired up, thinking they were on their way to fight the duke of Cumberland. They hadn't been told of the decision to retreat. Says Chambers: "As soon as daylight allowed them to see the surrounding objects, and they found, from marks they had taken of the road, that they were retracing their steps, nothing was to be heard throughout the whole army but expressions of rage and lamentation."

What Chambers means by "marks taken of the road" is uncertain. I would guess he means that the men recalled particular landmarks. A mill here, an inn there. Ambiguity is every translator's nightmare, and Mackenzie turns the phrase into: *Dh' aithnich iad le cotharraidhean a bha iad a cuir air na clachan-mìle le 'n claidheannan, mar bha iad a dol air an aghaidh, gun robh iad a nise pilleadh dhachaigh gun bhuidh.* "From marks they had put on milestones with their swords as they advanced, they realised they were now returning home after doing nothing."

I think Mackenzie was wrong, but how am I to know?

Despite the title of his book, one of Mackenzie's principal methods of abridging Chambers's text as he translated was to omit passages about the Prince. He makes an exception here. Chambers shows how Charles's body-language and behaviour had changed. Mackenzie translates this faithfully, ending: *A nise, bhiodh an armailt gu léir deas gu triall mu'n eireadh e, agus is gann gun canadh e facal connaltraidh ri iosal no uasal bho mhoch gu dubh.* "Now, the whole army would be ready to march before he got up, and he would scarcely exchange a word with high or low from dawn till dusk."

Thanks as usual to Lord George Murray, the retreat was conducted with so much skill that the Jacobites put themselves two days' march ahead of their pursuers. Cumberland ordered the country people to hinder them by breaking bridges and destroying roads, but, as Chambers points out, "the hardy mountaineers found little inconvenience from either storm in the air or ruts in the ground".

Whenever he meets a phrase like "hardy mountaineers" Mackenzie reaches for his mental storehouse of *bial-aithris*. He translates this one as "*fir threubhach nan Garbh-chrìoch*", complete with inverted commas: "the brave men of the Highlands". It will be from a song, I can't recall which. Later on, Chambers's mention of the army's return to "the land of tartan" provokes Mackenzie into "*Tìr nam beann 's nam breacan*" – "the Land of the bens and the tartan plaids".

Every so often Mackenzie gets muddled about numbers. It tends not to happen in isolation, which makes me suspect that tiredness or drink was the culprit. At p. 113 of "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" Mackenzie says the Prince reached Penrith on the evening of the 27th (*air feasgar an darra latha diag*) even though Chambers has told us, rightly, that it was the 17th. On the same page he says Cumberland had 40,000 cavalry (*dà fhichead mìle marcach*). Even Napoleon never had that many. He means 4,000 – *da-fhichead ceud marcach*, as he expressed it on the previous page.

I think Mackenzie's problem lay with his education. His father, Alastair Òg mac Iain Òig, had a tack of the land on the north side of Loch Ewe, and had been so anxious for his two sons John and James to be educated that he got the services first of a young man called William Falconer, son of the gardener at Brahan Castle, then of Donald Dunbar, from Tain, as family tutors. When they were a little older they were sent to school at Isle of Ewe, and

finally to the parish school of Gairloch. In the ceilidh-house at Meallan Tearlaich John will have learned plenty of songs, tales, riddles and proverbs, but little in the way of numbers, so probably all the arithmetic he ever studied was in the medium of English; to do it in Gaelic, he had to concentrate!

The Prince may have been at Penrith on the 17th, but the rearguard – which Lord George had wisely taken over – wasn't. Some ammunition wagons had broken down, allowing the lightest of Cumberland's horse to catch up. *Bha' chuideachd dheiridh air a deanamh suas de Dhòmhnullaich Ghlinne-Garaidh, fo' chomannda Iain Ruaidh Stiùbhairt*. "The rearguard consisted of the MacDonalds of Glengarry, commanded by John Roy Stewart."

Why Stewart, the professional soldier and poet who was colonel of the Edinburgh Regiment, should be in command of the Glengarry MacDonalds would have mystified the readers of "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa". In fact Mackenzie had carelessly misread Chambers, who had written: "The rear guard consisted of John Roy Stuart's regiment of 200 men, of the Glengary clan, and a few companies which attended the ammunition waggons; but it was reinforced on the present occasion by the Stewarts of Appin and Cluny Macpherson's regiment."

Mackenzie had had a bad patch, but the battle – or skirmish – of Clifton was coming up, and he recovered. Chambers explains that Murray sent John Roy to Charles at Penrith requesting reinforcements. John Roy returned with orders from Charles not to engage the enemy. Lord George knew he couldn't retreat without exposing his men to flanking fire from the hills, so he told John Roy not to mention Charles's orders to anyone, and "proceeded to make arrangements for giving the enemy the necessary check".

Mackenzie omits that particular section, but the description of the battle that follows is superb in both languages. "Daylight passed away, succeeded by a dark and cloudy night, with occasional bursts of moonlight," says Chambers. "By one of these transient gleams, Lord George saw a body of men – dismounted dragoons, or infantry who had resumed their proper mode of warfare – coming forward upon the enclosures beyond the road. He ordered the two regiments near him to advance, in doing which they received a fire from the enemy. At this Lord George exclaimed, 'Claymore!' an ordinary war-cry among the Highlanders, and rushed on sword in hand."

Let me finish the story by translating Mackenzie's words after *Claidheamh mòr!* "Before one could count seven (*mun cunnte seachd*) the Gael were in their midst (*nam buillsgean*), and they started hacking (*speòltach*) as they were accustomed to do with sword and shield, so that the enemy were routed (*gun ghabh an t-eascaraid ruaig*) in a few minutes."

Chambers adds that at an earlier period of the day "Lord George Murray had taken the Duke of Cumberland's footman, whom the Prince instantly sent back to his master". Mackenzie had obviously heard the anecdote told differently, for he footnotes his account of Clifton (again I translate): "In this skirmish (*arabhaig*) John Roy Stewart captured Duke William's *gille ton-eich* ('horse's-backside servant') or 'groom' as the Lowlanders say; after he had brought him to Charles by his collar as an object of derision (*mar chulaidh-àbhachd*), the Prince sent him back again to his master."

Chambers and Mackenzie now tell how the army left the Manchester Regiment to garrison Carlisle, then approached a ford on the Esk. It was 20 December, and the river was swollen to a depth of four feet. *Rinn iad an sin innleachd air an àth a chur*. "They worked out a stratagem for crossing the ford." Most of the cavalry was stationed above the ford to break the force of the current, then the infantry locked arms in ranks of ten or twelve abreast and advanced across the river, leaving enough gaps between these moving ranks for the water to flow through. Chambers concludes: "The whole passed over in perfect safety. Cavalry were placed farther down the river, to pick up all who might be carried away by the violence of the stream. None were lost, except a few girls."

What does that last phrase tell us about the year 1745, and the year 1840? I think Mackenzie found it strange. *Fhuair iad gu léir a null sàbhailt*, he says. "They all passed over

in safety.” He doesn’t mention the girls; they must have been children, for in those days there was no such thing as a teenager, women were called women, and the legal age of consent was twelve. It was only raised to thirteen in 1871, and to sixteen in 1885.

With the march to England over, Chambers indulges in some retrospection. Even in retreat the army had turned on the enemy “with a vigour which effectually checked it”, or as Mackenzie says, *ga’m pilleadh air ’n-ais mar chaoirich ro mhadraidh*, “turning them back like sheep before hounds”. They had brought the standard of Glenfinnan “unscathed, through the accumulated dangers of storm and war”, says Chambers, provoking Mackenzie into a quotation, *gun ghaoid gun bheud “tro mhile gàbhadh agus thorunn nan cath”* – “unblemished and unharmed ‘through a thousand perils and the thunder of battles’”.

Mackenzie omits much of what Chambers tells us about Carlisle and Dumfries. He omits anecdotes that speak of the Highland army’s frustration – private property was a little less well respected on the retreat than on the advance, and at Drumlanrig the army expressed its love of King James by slashing portraits of King William, Queen Mary and Queen Anne which hung in the grand staircase. Mackenzie does, however, accept that it was with difficulty that Charles’s men were prevented from sacking and burning Lesmahagow, where young Kinlochmoidart been captured by a mob on his way south from Skye, where he had been making one last effort to persuade MacDonald of Sleat and MacLeod to join the cause.

The fact is that nowhere in Scotland were Jacobites less popular than in the Covenanting south-west. This applied to Glasgow too, which the army reached on Christmas day, but with an extra reason – the city had benefited enormously from the American tobacco trade which had been brought to it by the Union of 1707, and had expanded far beyond any means of defence. “Obnoxious by its principles, and affording such prospects of easy and ample plunder,” says Chambers, “it was eagerly approached by the predatory bands of the chevalier.”

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