

Charlie's Year (18): The Battle of Falkirk

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE Battle of Falkirk was fought on 17 January 1746. The redcoat general, Henry Hawley, was so confident of not being attacked that he began the day by accepting an invitation to breakfast with Lady Kilmarnock at Callander House. In his “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” (1844) John Mackenzie uses a good word for breakfast here – *mocharan*, literally “early bread”.

Lady Kilmarnock was a well-known Jacobite whose husband was one of Prince Charles's officers. Mackenzie: *Bha' gheilbhinn uasal ud cho mhodhail na giùlan agus cho sgiamhach na maise, air chor is gu'm bu mhòr bu mhi-chuisiche leis an t-seann Seanaileir liath fèin "Briodal binn a beoil, seach tòirm searbh nan cath."*

I wish I knew what *geilbhinn* meant. Dwelly offers *geilbhean*, “a fawner”. Mackenzie is supposed to be translating from Robert Chambers's “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” (1840). Chambers says: “The *ruse* of the countess was attended with success. She was a woman of fine person and manners; and Hawley, completely fascinated, spent the whole of this important forenoon in her company, without casting a thought upon his army.”

Is a *geilbhinn* a woman who practises ruses, deceptions, something between a fawner and a seductress – “a charmer”?

The other interesting thing about Mackenzie's telling of the story is his use of a quotation. It sounds as if it's from Ossian, the national epic of its day; Mackenzie drew upon it to bestow upon his characters the significance which they deserved. I would translate: “That aristocratic charmer was so courteous in her manners and so fine in her person that the old grey-haired general was much more attracted to ‘The sweet flattery of her mouth than the bitter thunder of battles’.”

Mackenzie has more of his own to say in this chapter (his nineteenth) than in any we have met so far. His insertions begin right here. I translate: “They say that Hawley remained in this lady's company longer than was proper for a man of his profession who had been entrusted with such an important mission, and since there was plenty of wine in Callander House he did not leave empty.”

Charles was busy moving his main force around to the Red Army's right to take advantage of a stiff south-westerly breeze, while sending smaller detachments in other directions to confuse the enemy. Hawley was warned of this twice, but Mackenzie only tells us about the second occasion, when, says Chambers, he “came galloping up to his troops, with his head uncovered, and the appearance of one who has abruptly left a hospitable table”. Mackenzie translates faithfully, but can't resist adding a little period colour: *ceann-ruiste, gun ad gun phiorbhuic*, “head uncovered, without hat or periwig”.

In a gathering winter storm, Charles led his men up to a wide upland called Falkirk Muir – *Sliabh na h-Eaglais* – two miles south-west of what Chambers calls “the English camp”, Mackenzie's *càmp an airm-dhéirg*, “the Red Army's camp”. Chambers points out that Charles was doing exactly what he had done at Prestonpans: crossing a river (there the Esk, here the Carron) then marching obliquely uphill to get above the enemy.

There now follows a scene which I would love to see done by Hollywood. Hawley orders his dragoons to try to reach the top of the hill before the Highlanders. They gallop up a narrow path at the east end of Bantaskine Park. The foot follow at quick pace with bayonets inserted in musket. The artillery comes last, whipped along by a band of Falkirk carters hired that afternoon, Jacobites to a man; they all get stuck in a bog, and the drivers cut the traces and gallop back to the town.

Thus, as Chambers points out, does Hawley drive his army up to ground he has never seen, the unfittest possible for the movements of regular troops. “The sullen south-west, against which the army was marching, now let forth its fury full in their faces, blinding them

with rain, and rendering the ascent of the hill doubly painful. Still they struggled on, encouraged by the voice and gesture of their general, whose white uncovered head was everywhere conspicuous as he galloped about.”

It became a race to the top of the moor, and the Jacobites won. The *MacGregors* won, to be precise, which means that they took the right of the battle line, upstaging even the Clan Donald. Mackenzie makes an extraordinary mistake at this point. Comparing his line-up of clans with Chambers’s, it’s clear that he accidentally misses some out in the middle, including the MacPhersons. The irony is that “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” is dedicated to Cluny MacPherson for the specific reason that in 1844, of all the chiefs whose ancestors fought for Charles, he is the only one who is a Gaelic speaker – and thus able to read the book.

Falkirk Muir is now farmland and suburbia. The Forth & Clyde Canal and the A803 run through it. When the armies drew up there were 8,000 men on each side. *’S doigh leam*, says Mackenzie, *gun robh “cothrom na Féine” eadar na Gaill a’s luchd nam breacan*. “I reckon the Lowlanders and the men of the tartan plaids each had a sporting chance.” Chambers: “There could scarcely have been a better match.”

When Hawley ordered his dragoons to commence the action “it was near four o’clock, and the storm was rapidly bringing on premature darkness”. Mackenzie renders this poetically but precisely. *Bha’n ùine nis’ a’ teannadh dlù do cheithir uairean ’s an fheasgar sa’ mharcachd-shìne sgaoileadh doilleireachd, cho math ri dubhar an anmoich*.

Hawley’s idea was that the Highlanders would not withstand a cavalry charge. This is notable for one thing: when Mackenzie translates it, “idea” becomes *sùil*, “eye”. *Bha sùil aig Hawley . . . nach cumadh na Gàèil an aodann ri aon mharcach cogaidh*.

Hawley was wrong. Being on bad ground, the dragoons made several feints to draw the Highlanders’ fire. When the order to fire was given, it broke the dragoons immediately. Mackenzie adds a footnote at this point (I translate): “Wade himself was often heard saying in England that although he had often faced gunfire (*teine*) he had never seen marksmanship (*cuspaireachd*) as accurate as the first volley (*a’ chiad làdach*) fired by the right wing of the Highland army at his dragoons (*trùpairean*) in the Battle of Falkirk (*latha Sliabh na h-Eaglais*).”

Wade wasn’t at Falkirk. Mackenzie means Hawley, and is picking up a footnote from several pages further on in Chambers’s book where Hawley says in vindication of his actions: “I never saw any troops fire in platoons more regularly, make their motions and evolutions quicker, or attack with more bravery and better order, than those Highlanders did at the battle of Falkirk last week.”

The Highlanders’ fire brought many to the ground, says Chambers. Mackenzie goes further, claiming that scarcely a dozen bullets were lost in the heather, *air chor is gun tug iad “iomadh fear mòr a nios.”* Why the quotation marks I’m not sure. Ossian again? And I thought *a-nios* meant “up”, not “down”, but that’s Ross-shire Gaelic I suppose.

The dragoons trampled down their own infantry as they fled. Some were braver, however. Mackenzie follows Chambers in telling how, thrown on their backs under the feet of Whitney’s regiment, the Clanranald men used their dirks to stab the horses’ bellies, or dragged down the riders by their long-skirted coats. But he refrains from telling how young Clanranald, trapped under a dead horse, saw a fellow-clansman tumble down beside him in the arms of a dragoon, and had to wait until the dragoon had been stabbed before he could be released.

Mackenzie is more interested in the fate of Col. Robert Munro of Fowlis, who fought on the Government side. As a bearer of Ross-shire tradition he has much of interest to add. Chambers says that Munro was “the most distinguished officer among the slain”. Mackenzie makes him *diùlanach cho math agus saighdear cho treun sa dheanadh Alba mhòr gu léir an latha sin*: “as great a warrior and as brave a soldier as all Scotland could produce in those

days”. Chambers says that he was so corpulent that at Fontenoy he had to stay on his feet when all others threw themselves to the ground to avoid enemy fire. Mackenzie omits this.

Chambers says that at Fontenoy the Munroes had fought almost without intermission for a whole day. Mackenzie says that in that battle they had shown themselves to be “*mar bheathraichean geura nan cath*”. Quotation marks again – what’s it from? It means “like the sharp thunderbolts of the battles”.

Chambers says that at Falkirk the Munroes were “seized with a panic, and fled at the first onset”. Mackenzie agrees, but adds this footnote (I translate): “Some people say that the Munroes did not want to attack the other Gaels in the Battle of Falkirk, that they wanted to leave it to them and the English (*gu’n robh iad air son leigeil eadair iad fein ’s na Sasunnaich*). But as is shown below, when they saw that their chief had fallen in the battle they were greatly distressed (*bha ’n càs ro mhòr*), and were determined to avenge his death at the first opportunity. They succeeded in doing this at Culloden.”

So at Falkirk the Munroes fled, leaving their chief to face a Highland charge alone. He was attacked by six men, says Chambers, two of whom he killed with a half-pike. Mackenzie has more information: the other four tried to take him prisoner, but before they could do so, a friend of the two who had been killed came up: *chuir e peileir ann ma iochdar a chuirp agus bha e marbh air ball*. “He discharged a shot into his lower body and he died immediately.”

Chambers: “His brother, an unarmed physician, at this juncture came up to his relief, but shared in the indiscriminate slaughter which was then going on. Next day their bodies were found stripped and defaced, so as to be scarcely recognisable, in a little pool of water, formed around them by the rain.”

Mackenzie avoids this, telling us instead about the man who killed *Fear Fòlais*. Chambers calls him “Callum na biobhaig, Malcolm of the small lock of hair”, and Mackenzie corrects this to *Calum na Ciabhaig*. He was a MacGregor of Glengyle’s regiment, and *theagamh na robh siunnailt do Dhiùc Uilleam an Albainn ann am brùidealachd ’san cruas cridhe ach Calum na Ciabhaig*. “Duke William was perhaps unmatched for brutality and cruelty by anyone in Scotland except Calum na Ciabhaig.”

Mackenzie reminds us of the havoc this “horrible man” (*an duin’ uaraidh so*) had wrought at Prestonpans with an old scythe on an ash handle – slitting open horses’ bellies, hacking at hands and heads; when redcoats begged on their knees for mercy *bha e deanamh spealadh nan dialtag orra* – I think he means *deanntag*, “he scythed them like nettles”. The Prince had asked him afterwards why he showed no mercy, and *Calum còir* (“kindly Calum”) claimed that he did not have enough English to understand whether they wanted *sìth no còmhrag* – peace or war.

Chambers says of Sir Robert and his brother: “The corpses were honourably interred in one grave in the public cemetery of Falkirk, near the tombs of Graham and Stewart, the heroes of the former battle of Falkirk.”

The reference is to Wallace’s defeat in 1298. But Mackenzie has much, much more. He speaks of Sir Robert’s fame at Fontenoy and, in quotation marks, “*uirsgheil nan cath*” (“the legends of the battles”). He speaks of how Keppoch had him buried with honour, borne on the shoulders of Clan Donald. “While *Fear Fòlais* was being carried to the grave, two swords were placed crosswise on the lid of the coffin, along with a targe (*agus targaid ’nan glaic*). All the clan chiefs (*cinn-feadhna nam finneachan gu léir*) followed the procession, with six pipers playing *Cumha Fir Fòlais*.”

Finally, in the manner of the folklorist, Mackenzie gives his source. *Cha’n fhada bho’n a chaochail seana bhean a mhuinntir na h-Eaglaise-Bric aig an robh cuimhn’ air tiodhlaiceadh an fhiùidh so*. “It’s not long since the death of an old woman from Falkirk who remembered the funeral of this hero.”

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