Charlie's Year (20): his little kingdom

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

THE Battle of Culloden was fought 258 years ago today, and in this article I'm going to describe the two months from 16 February to 16 April 1746 as found in Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" of 1840 and in the book which was supposed to be a translation of it, John Mackenzie's "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844. Two months during which Charles and his officers attempted to carry out a policy of "Fortress Highlands" – consolidating their position in the Jacobite heartland by building up their military strength, rooting out their local enemies, destroying government fortresses, getting ready to defeat Cumberland in the spring. Oh, and waiting for the French, who were expected daily to land *air taobh siar na h-Alba*, Mackenzie tells us. On the west coast.

Cumberland was in Aberdeen, training his soldiers in the special skills required to counter a Highland army. Meanwhile the earl of Loudoun and his Campbell officers operated within the Highlands, liaising with pro-Government "Independent Companies" such as MacLeods, Grants and Rosses, servicing the forts, and generally causing Charles as much trouble as possible. In fact they caused him a lot of trouble before he had even reached the capital of his little kingdom, Inverness.

On Sunday 16 February Charles reached Moy Hall, seat of the Mackintoshes. Mackintosh himself was in the Government service, but his wife Anne had raised his people for the Jacobites – everyone hedged their bets in those days – and she welcomed him now. Chambers and Mackenzie are curiously far apart at this point. She "received him and his immediate attendants with great hospitality", says Chambers. *Faodaidh sinn a meas nach robh arigh a bh'fhearr leis a bhainntighearn' thighinn a dh'iarraidh cuid na h-òidhch' oirre na Tearlach Stiùbhart, a bha i bho chian an geall air fhaicinn*, says Mackenzie, using a word *airigh* that one doesn't come across very often: "We may suppose that there was no prince the lady would have preferred to come seeking the night's board and lodging from her than Charles Stuart, whom she had long wanted to see."

Loudoun was in Inverness with 1,700 men, says Chambers – *seachd ceud fear*, says Mackenzie, who is chronically hopeless with numbers. He had had a book-keeping job in the Glasgow University Printing Office in Dunlop Street, but I believe he gave it up in 1843 when he got the contract to translate Chambers's book. Not a minute too soon, if you ask me.

Loudoun was tipped off that Charles was at Moy, and set off to arrest him with 1,500 men, says Chambers – *cuig ceud fear*, says Mackenzie.

Lady Anne's mother-in-law, who lived in the town, sent a young lad called Lachlan Mackintosh to Moy with the news. Mackenzie conveys well the excitement of his journey. *Ghearr Lachunn Mac-an-Tòisich aithghearra talbhainn air feachd a Mhorair agus rainig e' Mhòidhe na làn fhalas ma chuig uairean sa' mhadainn dì-luain leis an naigheacd.*

What happened next is well known as "the Rout of Moy" – *Ruaig na Mòidhe*. It involves Dòmhnall Bàn MacCrimmon, the most famous piper of his day, and Mackenzie was always likely to have his own tuppenceworth to add, as piping stories were his speciality.

Lady Anne had sent out a five-man patrol that night, says Chambers; *seiseir fhear*, says Mackenzie, "six men". It was led by "a clever fellow named Fraser, the blacksmith of Moy"; *Dòmhnull Friseal*, says Mackenzie. He realised an army was coming, and "planting his men at intervals near the road" – *a measg phreasan bealaidh*, adds Mackenzie, "amongst broom bushes" – he fired and "killed the Laird of Macleod's piper", says Chambers – *dh'iarr e orra losgadh cho luath sa chitheadh iad coltas feachd a tighinn dlù dhaibh*, says Mackenzie, "he ordered them to fire as soon as they saw the likeness of an army approaching".

It was only then that Fraser fired, says Mackenzie, and he puts it well: *Loisg an gobha an làn a bha na sheanna mhosg ghlagaich féin nan còdhail; agus air m' aluinn, ged a b'e* urchair-theab *a bha sin, cha b'ann anns 'san fhraoch a chaidh am peileir! – Mharbh e*

pìobair Mhic-Leòid Dhùn-bheagain. “The smith fired the entire charge that was in his own battered old musket in their direction; and my goodness, though it was a random shot, no clump of heather took the bullet! – It killed MacLeod of Dunvegan’s piper.”

I’ve never heard the expression *air m’ aluinn*. It sounds like a bowdlerisation of *air m’ anam*, “upon my soul”. *Air m’ fhallaing*, “upon my cloak”?

Mackenzie has obviously heard the story hundreds of times. The smith’s men fired next, he says, and wounded three or four men. Chambers says that Fraser was heard crying on the Camerons and MacDonalds to advance on the villains who had come to murder their prince, but Mackenzie gives the words: *A Chlann Dòmhnuill, seasaibh air an laimh dheis, a Chlann Chatainn seasaibh air an laimh chlì, agus seasaidh mi-féin ’s na Frisealaich sa mheadhon, agus faiceam nach leig sibh anam beò dheth na ghràisg as, a thàinig air tì bhur Prionnsa gràidh a mhort!*

They thought it was Lochiel’s voice, says Mackenzie, and although Chambers describes well how Loudoun’s men turned and fled in terror, it’s Mackenzie who has the vast literature of *sgeulachdan* at his command, and comes up with this in quotation marks: *Chuir gach fear aghaidh air iùil ’sa chùl ri ain-eol*. (“Each man turned his face to the known and his back to the unknown.”)

As they trampled on each other to escape, *am fear bu laige bha e’n iochdar, ’s am fear bu treise bha e’n uachdar*: “the weakest was beneath, and the strongest on top”.

Charles came out of hiding, enjoyed his breakfast (*biadh-maidne*) with Lady Anne, and spent the day mustering a force big enough to take Inverness, which they did next day, 18 February. *An t-ochdamh*, says Mackenzie. He had fallen off a wall at the age of 17 when he was a carpenter’s apprentice, and had had to give up the trade. Now we know why. If you’d asked this man the length of a six-inch nail, he’d have said a foot.

Loudoun didn’t stand and fight, and the Independent Companies fled by the Kessock Ferry (*thar Port Cheasaig*) to Ross-shire. The Prince now besieged Fort George, which Chambers describes as “upon the site of the ancient castle of Inverness . . . commanding the town on one hand, and the bridge over the Ness on another”; Mackenzie calls it *gearasdan Aird-nan-Saor* (“the garrison of Ardersier”).

They couldn’t both be right. In fact, Mackenzie, the local man more or less (he was from Gairloch), was wrong. Charles captured the fort and blew it up, and when the Redcoats came back to rebuild it after Culloden the town council nervously requested that they put it somewhere else – which was when they picked Ardersier. Chambers takes the opportunity to get in a dig at the French. “The destruction of the fort . . . was not effected without loss. The French engineer who was charged with this duty, thinking the match was extinguished, approached to examine it, when the explosion took place, and carried him up into the air along with the stones of the bastion.”

That was on 20 February. If you have been wondering how we are to get to 16 April in one leap, the answer is this. The Jacobites spent eight weeks quite successfully in sieges and skirmishes around the Highlands – at Fort Augustus, at Fort William, in Keith, in Perthshire, in Ross-shire, in Sutherland – but Mackenzie omits it all. There are three possible reasons, the cock-up theory, the conspiracy theory, and the get-on-with-the-story theory.

According to the cock-up theory, Mackenzie accidentally skipped the two pages of Chambers which contained this material, reading straight from “This party, before their artillery could be brought through the snow, attacked the old” at the bottom of p. 77 to “so close as to kill thirty-six of the men” at the top of p. 80.

According to the conspiracy theory, including this material would have obliged Mackenzie to acknowledge that his fellow-clansman Lord Cromarty was the worst general the Jacobites ever had. Actually Chambers is quite kind, merely saying that when he was sent north with his Mackenzies and others to pursue Loudoun, his forces were insufficient, “but a greater deficiency seems to have been found in the commander”, and that when the Prince sent Lord George Murray to relieve him of command, Lord George found that Loudoun and

his army had crossed over to Sutherland "without the Earl of Cromarty having obtained any intelligence of the fact, though he was in what the Highlanders emphatically called his own country".

Actually it's worse. On 15 April Cromarty's 300-strong force was surrounded and taken prisoner by Ensign John MacKay of Mudale (better known as a poet) as it attempted to cross the Little Ferry between Golspie and Dornoch. Cromarty and his officers weren't with them, for, according to the late Ian Grimble's "The World of Rob Donn", they were enjoying the hospitality of the Countess of Sutherland, and MacKay captured them while drinking and carousing: "The poet entered Dunrobin castle, pistol in hand, and searched for the Earl of Cromartie until he found him hiding under a bed."

Finally, according to the get-on-with-the-story theory, Mackenzie's publisher, Thornton & Collie of Edinburgh, had told him to write a book of 320 pages, and the only way for him to do that was to miss out large chunks of Chambers.

So let's get on with the story. On 8 April Cumberland's army marches west from Aberdeen, 9,000 strong. On 10 April at Banff he hangs two Highland spies. One of them is "in the act of notching the numbers of the army upon a stick, according to a fashion which also obtains among the North American Indians". Mackenzie omits this, and, as if in dialogue with Chambers, counters the slur by saying that when Cumberland's army successfully fords the Spey on 12 April (only "one dragoon and four women" being swept away by the stream), the credit for it is due to *na saighdearan Gàëlach a bha còladh riu*, the Highland soldiers who were with them.

The river was forded in three places: "at Garmouth" (*air a' Bhial-gharbh*), "near Gordon Castle" (*fo Chaisteal-Gòrdon*) and "by the church of Belly" (*aig Clachan Bhealaidh*). I doubt if Belly is *Bealaidh* ("Broom"). It's more likely to be *Beul Àtha* ("Ford").

On Sunday 14 April, in the streets of his capital, Charles summons his troops with drums beating and pipes playing. He walks back and forth between the lines (with drawn sword, says Mackenzie) speaking words of encouragement, then leads them on horseback to Culloden House to face the enemy.

Large parts of his army were still scattered around the Highlands, however, and he only had 6,000 men. What's more, he was determined to defend Inverness at all costs, which meant occupying the lower ground in any pitched battle. For these reasons, at 3 p.m. on Monday 15th, he and his council decided that the best way to neutralise the difference in size between the Jacobite army and Cumberland's was to utilise the special abilities of their light, irregular force. That meant a night attack on Cumberland's camp at Nairn.

The 15th was Cumberland's birthday. Every Redcoat, they knew, had had an allowance of brandy, cheese and biscuit. If Cumberland was anything like Hawley, he and his men would be "sleeping off the effects of the debauch" and could be "surprised and cut to pieces".

The march to battle began in darkness at eight in the evening. They had nine miles to go, and expected to reach Cumberland's camp soon after midnight. But it was a very dark night, and to achieve total surprise their way lay across boggy ground.

Midnight on 16 April 1746 saw six thousand men floundering through a bog.

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