

Charlie's Year (21): Hungry Culloden Moor

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I brought us to a minute past midnight on the morning of Culloden day, Wednesday 16 April 1746. It was a nightmare in black with flashes of steel. Charles and his army of 6,000 men were trying to do exactly what they had done the night before Prestonpans in early September – slip through a bog to take the enemy by surprise at first light. But at Prestonpans they had one mile to go; this time it was nine.

In his “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” of 1840 Robert Chambers tells us it was 2 a.m. before the head of the first column passed Kilravock, three miles from Cumberland’s camp near Nairn. Now I’m going to leave them in suspended animation while I set the scene for the final battle.

First a “Quern-Dust Calendar” kind of point. In 1752 Parliament made the change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian. As a result thirteen days have been lost, so that in terms of daylight hours and seasons the battle of Culloden was fought on what we now call 29 April. Because of BST the sun rises on 29 April 2004 at about 5.30, whereas on 29 April 1746 it rose at 4.30.

It had taken the troops six hours to walk six miles. The leader, Lord George Murray, was, in Chambers’s words, “vexed at the slowness of the march”. At this pace, even the van of the army wouldn’t reach the redcoat camp until half an hour after sunrise. Lord George “sent repeated requests, expressed in the most urgent terms, for the rear to join the van; but these were either disregarded, or could not be executed”.

Cumberland’s army had marched at a leisurely pace from Aberdeen, where they had spent the time from 25 February to 8 April. What were they doing there? Chambers: “The superiority of the broadsword over the bayonet at Preston and Falkirk had given rise to much discussion among military men, and during this winter many suggestions had been made and discussed in the public journals for putting the weapons of the regular troops upon a par with those of the insurgents.

“It was reserved for the Duke of Cumberland effectually to obviate the supposed superiority of the claymore and target. He had perceived that the greatest danger to which the regular troops were subjected in a charge of the Highlanders, arose from the circumstance, that the latter received his antagonist’s point in his target, swayed it aside, and then had the defenceless body of the soldier exposed to his own weapon.

“The duke conceived, that if each man, on coming within the proper distance of the enemy, should direct his thrust, not at the man directly opposite to him, but against the one who fronted his right-hand comrade, the target would be rendered useless, and the Highlander would be wounded in the right side, under the sword-arm, ere he could ward off the thrust. Accordingly he had instructed the men during the spring in this new exercise.”

My third point is this. We all know the ground on which Culloden was fought, even if only from driving up and down the A9. It’s broad sloping moorland overlooking the Moray Firth to the north and Inverness to the west. Charles was so desperate to defend Inverness that he was willing to attack uphill.

Last weekend I was in the Falkirk area visiting a friend from Tiree, so I thought I’d look at the ground where Charles won his last victory, on 17 January 1746. I found the rocket-shaped battle monument at the south end of Greenbank Road, a mile south-east of the Falkirk Wheel. The ground is spectacular – looking north to Stirling and the Highland hills, you’re at the top of steeply-rising wooded ground. Beautiful and undulating, Falkirk Muir stretches away behind you and to the left; to the right Lochgreen Road brings you steeply down through the suburbs to the town centre. Charles didn’t try to defend Stirling; crossing the Carron and passing where the Wheel is now, he got up behind Hawley’s army, forced them to leave their cannon down below, attacked them from above and won.

The monument dates from 1927 and is in need of repair. A plaque in Gaelic should be placed here. Falkirk was the last battle ever won by a Highland army. It hasn't been forgotten; there were two wreaths there last weekend, fairly fresh.

Next three questions, three answers. The Spey, the boundary of Charles's Highland kingdom, was a huge obstacle. Why didn't he stop Cumberland there? The answer is superior artillery. If the Jacobites had massed on the west bank to stop the redcoats fording the river, Cumberland's cannon would have blown them to bits. His artillery commander Colonel Belford was, says Chambers, "an excellent engineer". In "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844, which was supposed to be a translation of Chambers's work, John Mackenzie goes further. He speaks of *Corneileir Bedford, an gunnair a b' ainmeile' a bh'ann am Breatainn ri linn*: "Colonel Bedford (!), the most famous gunner in Britain in his day."

Lord George was said to have been relaxed about the Spey crossing, and to have declared: "The more of the Elector's men come over, there will be the fewer to return!" But those guns would haunt him on Culloden day.

Next question: why were many Jacobite regiments absent from the battle? After all, Cumberland's lumbering march from Aberdeen had given them plenty of warning. Were they defending their little kingdom against MacLeods, Munroes, Campbells?

Not really. The reason Culloden pitted 6,000 men against 12,000 was hunger.

The food supply had collapsed. The early '40s had been famine years. That was why the Whig government was unpopular and the Jacobite opposition had a lot of support. Charles hadn't helped by arriving without French help in July and having to gather forces to fight a major battle – Prestonpans – in harvest-time.

Even after a *good* harvest, April was always the hungriest month of the year, especially if the supply of meal ran out before the cows came into milk. So Inverness was unable to sustain large numbers of troops. On Tuesday 15 April Charles's soldiers in the town were given nothing to eat but one small loaf of the worst kind – *aon bhuilionn beag de dhroch aran*, as Mackenzie translates it. "Strange as the averment may appear," says Chambers, "I have beheld and tasted a piece of the bread served out on this occasion; being the remains of a loaf, or *bannock*, which had been carefully preserved for eighty-one years by the successive members of a Jacobite family.

"It is impossible to imagine a composition of greater coarseness, or less likely either to please or satisfy the appetite; and perhaps no recital, however eloquent, of the miseries to which Charles's army was reduced, could have impressed the reader with so strong an idea of the real extent of that misery, as the sight of this singular relic. Its ingredients appeared to be merely the husks of oats, and a coarse unclean species of dust, similar to what is found upon the floors of a mill."

Quern-dust.

Even before the night march many of the troops abandoned their posts on the moor to look for food. "They told their commanders to shoot them if they pleased, rather than compel them to starve any longer": *iad ga'n grad thilgeadh, gu'n bu roghnaiche leo 'm bàs no claidh na gorta*. The worst sight they saw that day was government ships arriving in the firth laden with victuals for the enemy. Mackenzie adds (I translate): "The Highlanders were perished (*air an claidh*) with cold and hunger, while the redcoats were well provisioned (*bha na saighdearan dearga air deagh ghiullachd*), with all the food and drink they could consume."

Last question: what else was on men's minds during the night march through the bog? Their orders. When they got to the redcoat camp no firearms must be used, only sword, dirk and bayonet. They were to cut down or overturn the tents, and wherever they saw a swelling or bulge "there to strike and push vigorously". *Bualadh orra le claidheamh a's biodag, 's am bruanaidh thall sa' bhos*.

At 2 a.m. Lord George called a halt. It was going to be too late to effect a surprise. A distant drum-roll from Cumberland's camp proved his point. Daylight would expose them to

“the observation and fire of the enemy”. They would be *fo chomraich teine an nàmhaid*, says Mackenzie oddly, “under the sanctuary of enemy fire”. Charles, in the rear, was furious.

The exhausted army got back to Culloden Moor at 7 a.m. The choice for the men was to sleep or go foraging. Even in Culloden House there was nothing for the Prince but a little bread and whisky. He gave orders that the countryside be ransacked for food. “Considerable supplies were procured,” says Chambers, “and subjected to the cook’s art at Inverness; but the poor famished clansmen were destined never to taste these provisions – the hour of battle arriving before they were prepared.”

Yes, it was a lunchtime battle: one o’clock. By eleven the plain had blackened, says Chambers – reddened, surely – with Cumberland’s marching troops. The Prince gathered 5,000 men: *cùig ceud fear*, says Mackenzie, with his usual blindness for figures, then in translating the list of regiments he misses out the greatest heroes of the day, the Mackintoshes. Chambers describes the redcoats: “The army now marched forward in complete battle-array, their fixed bayonets glittering in the sun, their colours flying, and the sound of 100 drums rolling forward in defiance of the insurgents.”

Mackenzie translates well, adding: *Bha na Gàèil gha’n amharc a dlùthachadh ri uchd catha le na bu mhò ’dh’iongantas no dh’ uabhas . . .* “The Highlanders watched them approach more with surprise than with horror, and looked neither right nor left until their enemies stopped about 100 paces before them on the field.”

The sun disappeared and showers of sleet arrived on a north-easterly, the same direction Cumberland had marched from. Charles tried to move his army to windward, but was outmanoeuvred. Chambers tells of a Jacobite who gave himself up to the redcoats, was passed back through the ranks, saw a senior officer, guessed wrongly it was Cumberland, grabbed a musket, fired, missed, and was shot dead. We’d call him a suicide bomber.

The Jacobites began the action with their artillery, but Mackenzie tells how one of their own side often said *gum “b’ann le cuimse cho olc is nach buaileadh iad cruach-mhòin’ air a tarsuinn!”* Their aim was so bad they couldn’t hit a peatstack laid crosswise! Belford’s, on the other hand, was deadly: *cha b’e sin a chuspaireachd chearbach*. Charles made the mistake of restraining his troops for a full half hour. They were decimated by grapeshot (*peileirean frois*). The Mackintoshes were first to rush into the smoke, then all the rest except the MacDonalds. Chambers: “The whirlwind does not reap the forest with greater rapidity than the Highlanders cleared the line.”

This is Mackenzie’s cue to use traditional imagery: the heroes rush forward *mar gharbh-fhras de chlacha-meallainn an Fhaoilich* till they are *an ionad taruinn lann*, and beat back the three regiments facing them *mar gu’n sgaoileadh osag nam beann an ceò air falbh bharr uilinn nan cnoc*.

Put simply, the redcoat front line mows down the Highland front line, the Highland second line mows down the redcoat front line, the redcoat second line mows down the Highland second line. Foregone conclusion, end of story.

Charles had needed a miracle. Loaves and fishes would have done nicely. He didn’t get one.

30 April 2004