

## Charlie's Year (22): Mackenzie goes out of control

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

AS YOU pick John Mackenzie's "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844 off the shelf for the first time you're likely to say: "Aha! A history of the '45 in Gaelic. That should set the record straight. I wonder what he has to say about Culloden?"

There again, if you've been following this column for the past few months you'll be prepared for disappointments – and surprises. You'll know that this, the only Gaelic book on the most Gaelic of subjects, is an abridged translation of one by a man from Peebles in the Borders, the 1840 edition of Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6".

But you'll also know that (despite his Edinburgh publisher) Mackenzie was his own man. He made lots of mistakes, especially with numbers; dug deep into Gaelic tradition for appropriate quotations; put in strong opinions; and every so often added something interesting instead of just taking things away. But none of this could have prepared you for his chapter on Culloden, which is outrageous.

Let me illustrate some of these points. First, consider this revealing little difference between our Lowland and Highland historians. Chambers says of "Colonel Ann", Lady Mackintosh: "Only three of her officers had escaped." But Mackenzie says: *Cha do phill a dh-aithris an sgeòil ach ma dheich 'ar fhichead agus trùir oifigeach*. ("All that returned to tell the tale were thirty men and three officers.")

Second, let's consider the MacDonalds. Both Chambers and Mackenzie point out that while the other clans were "performing this brilliant but fatal charge" (*a treun-iomairt nan lann anns sa' chaonnaig bhasmhoir, ach chlà-mhaireannaich so*), the MacDonalds hung back out of pique at not being given their traditional place on the right wing. This, judging from Chambers's account, was a mistake made by John O'Sullivan as Charles's adjutant. "According to the report of one of their officers," says Chambers, "the clan not only resented this indignity, but considered it as omeneing evil fortune to the day."

The report in question was (we now know) written by the poet Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair, a captain in the Clanranald regiment. I have a copy before me, and it makes striking reading. He has described the entire campaign from the Prince's arrival in Loch nan Uamh on 18 July – his first meeting with the Prince on board ship, the raising of the standard, Prestonpans, Derby, Clifton, Falkirk, the night march to Nairn. He says what was wrong on the morning of Culloden day: exhaustion, hunger, missing men. "Of those who did engage, many had hurried back from Inverness &c upon the alarm of the enemys aproach, both gentlemen and others, as I did myself, having only taken one drink of ale to supply all my need."

He goes on: "Add to this, what we of the Clan McDonalds thought ominous, we had not this day the right hand in battle as formerly and as we enjoyed in this enterprize when the event proved successfull, as at Gladsmuir and Falkirk, and which our clan maintains we had enjoyed in all our battles and struggles in behalf of our Royall family since the battle of Bannockburn . . ."

Finally he blames "P" (the Prince) for allowing himself to be bullied and "L" (Lord George Murray) for bullying him: "Our sweet natured P. was prevailed on by L. and his faction to assign this honour to another on this fatall day, which right we judge they will not refuse to yeild us back again next fighting day. As to particulars of the Culloden battle I leave it to the abovementiond and other accounts well known to many."

That's the end of Alastair's account; it reveals embarrassment, guilt, denial, a craving to be allowed a second chance. For what happened? The duke of Perth pleaded with the MacDonalds to charge, saying that if they fought, "they would make the left wing a right, in which case he would assume for ever after the honourable surname of Macdonald" – *gu'n goirt' an laimh dheas ris an làimh chli*, says Mackenzie, *cho fad sa' bhiodh Gàèl air*

*domhainn no seanachaidh a dh' aithriseadh sgeula nan cath* (which meant a lot more to Gaelic readers than a duke changing his surname).

Chambers says they discharged their muskets, and even advanced some way. Mackenzie, who held no brief for Clan Donald, denies even this. *Cha rachadh iad ceum air aghaidh*, he says, *cha do tharrunn iad lann na gunna*. According to Chambers they endured the redcoats' gunfire without flinching, expressed their rage by attacking the heather with their swords, and finally fled when the other clans gave way. Both writers agree however that one MacDonald had guts – the laird of Keppoch. When he saw his men retreating he said: “My God, have the children of my tribe forsaken me!”

He advanced with sword and pistol, was brought down by a bullet, was helped to his feet by a kinsman, rushed forward again, took another bullet, and rose no more.

It's clear that Mackenzie takes this story straight from Chambers, because he gives Keppoch's words as: *Mo Dhia! an do thréig Clann mo Chinnidh mi?* To my mind this is bad Gaelic, an excessively literal translation – “My God!” is not *Mo Dhia!* but *A Dhia!* But I've seen these words elsewhere, in Prebble's book “Culloden” I think. Which shows that Mackenzie was influential.

Third, I've drawn attention more than once in these articles to Chambers's elevation of Charles into a romantic hero. It was natural for Chambers to do this. His own hero was Sir Walter Scott (whom he knew personally), and dashing but rather empty-headed young aristocrats were the stuff of what Sir Walter wrote. He was, after all, a Tory.

On the other hand, despite the title of his book Mackenzie leaves out all the passages devoted to praising Charles. He makes it clear that his hero is the ordinary Highland soldier. The same goes for Mac Mhgr Alastair. We've already noticed how he calls Charles “our sweet natured P.” His poem “Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill” (“Clanranald's Galley”) is, I'm certain, an allegory of the '45, in which ordinary men do all the hard work, Clanranald plays a bit part, and the Prince and his other officers are nowhere to be seen. It's hard not to think of Culloden when, in the “storm” scene late in the poem, he speaks of

*Fàileadh is deathach na riofa*  
*Gar glan thachdadh*

(“The smell and smoke of the reefing sail / Completely choking us”) and of

*Talamh, teine, uisge 's sian-ghaath*  
*Ruinn air togail*

(“Earth, fire, rain and elements / Raised against us”). He also speaks of *peileirean beithrich* (“bullets of fire, thunderbolts”), of *cogadh* (“war”), and of *sìth* (“peace”). The late Angus MacLeod was quite puzzled by this when he edited the poem. In his book “Sàr Òrain” he wrote: “There is no reason why the reef of the sail in particular should take fire.”

After describing Keppoch's gallant death Chambers picks up the Prince's viewpoint: “When the whole front line of Charles's host had been thus repulsed, there only remained to him the hope that his Lowland and foreign troops, upon whom the wreck of the clans had fallen back, might yet make head against the English infantry, and he eagerly sought to put himself at their head.”

For a minute it worked. The Irish troops checked the dragoons' pursuit of the fleeing MacDonalds, and one of Lord Lewis Gordon's regiments delayed the redcoats who were breaking through the enclosures on the Highland army's flank. But the pressure was too great, and the Jacobites gave way.

How does Mackenzie translate this? “When the Duke saw the Highlanders on the point of retreat, he ordered his cavalry to encircle them (*iathadh mu'n cuairt dhaibh*) so that they could not escape without being utterly destroyed; the cavalry tried to do that but failed, as the

Lowland, French and Irish regiments, which had not yet yielded, subjected the cavalry to a volley (*loisg iad làdach air na trùpairean*) which stopped them in their tracks till the Highlanders had got away.”

He has written Charles out of the story, and Cumberland into it!

Fourth, Mackenzie’s chapter “Blar Chuil Fhodair” is six pages long. Half of the last two is taken up by a huge footnote in which he tells a story from his native Ross-shire that doesn’t appear in Chambers’s book at all. This is how it goes. Twelve MacRaes and a piper are fleeing the battlefield. The piper sits down in a coppice of willow (*badan beag de phreis sheilich*) to wrap up his pipes in his plaid. He is spotted by a dragoon, who dismounts to kill him. Before the dragoon can defend himself (*mu’n deach an trùpair na earalas*) the piper’s dirk is deep in his body.

After helping himself to the money in the man’s pocket the piper tries to pull off his boots. They are too tight, so he cuts the legs off at the knee with his dirk and tucks them into his plaid (*thilg se iad ann an lùib a bhreacain*) with the pipes. Then he takes off after his companions, but can’t catch sight of them (*cha d’ fhuair e fradharc orr’*).

That night the MacRaes reach the inn at Torgyle (*Torra-Ghoill*) in Glenmoriston. There’s no room for them in the house, so they sleep in the barn, telling the innkeeper that death will be the fate of anyone who troubles them before morning (*duine sam bith a chuir bruillean orra gu madainn*).

The piper reaches Torgyle in a sweat (*na làn fhalas*) about midnight. The innkeeper’s daughter opens the door and he asks her if she has seen twelve MacRaes (*dà Rathach dhiag*). “Yes, but they haven’t moved on, they’re sleeping in the barn.”

“*Théid mi còladh riu. I’ll join them,*” says the piper.

“*Cha téid,*” says the girl, “they ordered no one to go near them till morning. It won’t be safe for you to go there. But I’ll make you up a bed in the byre that will be much more comfortable (*mòran n’as seasgair*).”

When the piper has had his food and his dram he and the girl go into the byre. The night is cold and he says he will lie down in the stall in front of the brindled cow (*anns a bhualaidh air bial-thaobh na bà riabhaich*). She asks why, and he says the cow’s breath will keep him warm. So he stretches out in the stall in front of the cow and the girl spreads a good layer of hay (*ultach math feòir*) over him.

As soon as she has gone the piper sets to. He works the Englishman’s legs (*luirgnean*) out of the boots (*na bòtan*), throws them into the manger (*anns an fhrasaich*) in front of the brindled cow, and wraps the boots in his plaid along with the pipes.

When day dawns he is already on his way with the other Kintailmen (*na Sàilich eile*). The innkeeper’s daughter goes to the byre to bid him good morning (*chum fàilte na madainn’ a chuir air*), but all she sees in place of her darling (*fear a cridhe*) is the Englishman’s legs. *Bhuail i na basan as thog i ioram na truaighe*. She strikes her palms in anguish, raises a cry of mourning and goes weeping (*anns a ghal*) to her father, who asks what is wrong. “*Och nan och,*” says she, “the brindled cow has eaten the piper, there’s nothing left of him but his legs!”

The innkeeper runs out of the house with his axe, slaughters the cow, and buries her and the legs in the same grave.

Now this story is well known to folklorists. In Bruford and MacDonald’s “Scottish Traditional Tales” there’s a version in Scots called “The Wandering Piper” by Willie McPhee the traveller, and the editors say that as “Getting Rid of the Man-Eating Calf” it’s known from Finland to Mexico. In “The British Folklorists” Richard Dorson tells an Irish version and adds: “Curiously this folktale is told as a true incident befalling a soldier at the battle of Culloden.”

What did Mackenzie think he was writing? History or folklore? Fact or fiction? Tragedy or comedy?

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