

## Charlie's Year (23): Strike not the weak

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE LATE Calum Maclean, Sorley's brother, wrote in his excellent book "The Highlands" that "the conduct of the Hanoverian troops on the field of Culloden is one of the very black chapters in the history of Britain", and that in "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844 John Mackenzie gives us "a fairly detailed description of one of the grimmest episodes".

Maclean explains: "About forty wounded Highlanders were huddled into a barn near Culloden House, the doors were securely locked and, despite the piteous entreaties of the unfortunate men, the building was given to the flames and all within perished. MacKenzie goes on to state that the excesses of the Hanoverian troops were so enormous that only the timely intervention of Cumberland himself prevented a very serious clash between some Scottish and English detachments under his command."

Now of these two statements attributed to Mackenzie, both originate in Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" of 1840; the second chronologically comes first, and the first isn't really in Mackenzie at all.

So let's take the second first. Chambers tells how after the battle the redcoat army marches to Inverness. Cumberland gives orders that all prisoners taken who had deserted government ranks in order to join the Jacobites are to be hanged. One such is a young man called Forbes. An English officer runs up to the almost lifeless corpse and stabs it with his sword, exclaiming that "all his countrymen were traitors and rebels like himself". Mackenzie gives the words much more fully: *A shlaighteir fairich sin! 's ged a bhiodh do luchd-dùthcha gu léir air an aon diol riut is beag bu mhist' an saoghal e; ceannaircich reasgach, agus luchd-brathaidh mi-dhileas.* ("Feel that, you rogue! And even if all your countrymen had the same treatment the world would be little the worse of it – perverse traitors and faithless betrayers.")

This is too much for one Scots officer, who draws his sword and demands satisfaction. Soon the pair are in combat in the open street. Others join in on each side. "The men then beat to arms, and joined the ranks of their respective officers." The duke hears of it, and arrives to find the two factions "about to make a general charge against each other". So it is, as Mackenzie puts it, that the next battle was about to begin between the Scottish and English soldiers when Cumberland intervened with a troop of cavalry (*nuair a thàinig an Diùc le pairti thrùpairean san eadraiginn*).

Maclean's tale of the "forty wounded Highlanders" relates to what comes next. It's ironic that this issue should come up in the very month when the media have been filled with evidence of the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by US and British forces. All war corrupts, all racism corrupts, all fear corrupts. Chambers tells how on the battlefield the following day "about seventy poor wretches were gathered amongst the heaps of slain, and carried to pieces of rising ground" (*braighe uchdain*, says Mackenzie) "where, being properly ranged, they were dispatched by platoons of musketry".

Next day again (Friday 18 April 1746) the redcoats' target is those wounded who are sheltering in neighbouring houses. Chambers tells us that the young laird of MacLeod (a Hanoverian, remember) "was afterwards heard to declare that on this day he saw seventy-two persons killed in cold blood. In one instance, the sheltering hut was set fire to, and burnt under a guard, by whom any one attempting to escape was instantly bayoneted. Amidst the ashes, thirty-two blackened corpses were found."

That's the nearest I have found to Calum Maclean's tale, and it isn't given by Mackenzie at all. It seems to have coalesced in Maclean's mind with the following, which is given by both writers. Nineteen wounded Jacobite officers are brought to the courtyard of Culloden House on a stretcher (*air cràgh-leabaidh*) by the steward there (*Siamarlan Thighearna Chuil-Fhodair*). They are found by redcoats, who bring them on carts to a park wall and tell them

to prepare for death, or in Mackenzie's words: *Ghiùlan siad iad a mach gu cùl garaidh, a bha dlù do'n àite, iar dhaibh an càradh nan sreath ri taobh a chèile, chaidh iarraidh orra bhi g' ullachadh air son bàis.*

I quote this because I know from another source that John Mackenzie had a great fondness for the old pre-1800 Gaelic scriptures as transliterated from Irish by the Rev. Robert Kirk. This shows up clearly in the words *siad* ("they") and *iar* ("after"). Only Biblical language could do justice to such a scene. While the men are still on their knees praying, says Chambers, "a platoon of musketry put an end to the lives of nearly all. To complete the work, the soldiers were ordered to club their muskets, and beat out the brains of such as showed any symptoms of life."

Mackenzie translates this well (*a chum an obair a dheanamh n'a bu ro chinntiche thòisich na saighdearan air sadadh nan eanachailean asda le earr nam mosgaidean*), but spares his readers the account that follows of the appalling mutilation of John Alexander Fraser or Maciver, an officer in the Master of Lovat's regiment, who was saved by the intervention of a redcoat officer. Strange to say, he survived, "a dismal memorial of the cruelties of Culloden".

All this barbarism comes as more of a shock in Mackenzie's translation than in Chambers's original, because Chambers has been quietly preparing us for it with occasional insights into the mind of the duke of Cumberland – the sort of thing that, in his anxiety to get on with the plot, has ended up on Mackenzie's cutting-room floor. For example, back in his chapter "Proceedings in the North" Chambers had written of Cumberland's stay in Aberdeen from late February to early April 1746. In his letters, says Chambers, Cumberland expressed the sentiments with which his first experience of Scotland had filled him (he was 25, the same age as his cousin Charles). What comes across could just as easily have been written this week by an American general in Baghdad.

The people, Cumberland complained, were Jacobites almost to a man. Even the loyalists were of little use to him. He could get no intelligence, and reckoned himself more in enemy country than when he had been fighting the French in Flanders. Mild measures with such a country would not do. "You will find," says he to the duke of Newcastle, "that the whole of the laws of this ancient kingdom must be new modelled. Were I to enumerate the villains and villanies this country abounds in, I should never have done."

And Chambers comments wryly: "It is a pity that he did not at least enumerate certain dubious acts committed by William Duke of Cumberland and Lieutenant-general Henry Hawley, of which the world wanted a right account for eighty years."

This is the Abu Ghraib syndrome. The prejudice of the commander-in-chief at the top is reflected by the brutality of his soldiers at the bottom. Cumberland is remembered in history as "the Butcher", but Chambers and Mackenzie tell us what went on in the butcher's shop. Immediately after the battle, for example, under the command of the officers, the men go around the field stabbing the wounded with their bayonets or slashing them with their swords. "This was done as much in sport as in rage," says Chambers, "and, as the work went on, the men at length began to amuse themselves by splashing and dabbling each other with blood." One of the soldiers afterwards confessed to "The Scots Magazine" – the "Daily Mirror" of the day – that they looked "more like so many butchers than an army of Christian soldiers", in Mackenzie's words *n'a bu choltaiche ri feòladairean na ri àrmait de shaighdearan Criosdaidh.*

The same applied to the treatment of prisoners. To give one example, 157 men were put into the hold of a vessel to be taken to London. They were naked or half-naked. "They had to burrow amidst the earth and stones forming the ballast, as the only resource to keep themselves warm." They were kept eight months at sea like this, by the end of which only 49 survived.

Mackenzie omits that one, but perceives the need to make some general statement. He builds a lengthy footnote on a brief remark of Chambers's in which we are reminded how

well the Jacobites treated enemy wounded and prisoners after their victories at Prestonpans and Falkirk. “The leader in particular,” says Chambers, “manifested on various occasions a degree of clemency and forbearance with which even his own officers sometimes found fault, as being carried to what they thought a dangerous extreme.”

Mackenzie says: “The humanity (*daontachd*) of the Gael and the cruelty (*an-trocair*) of the men of England were clearly seen in the behaviour (*gnàthachadh*) of Charles after the battle of Prestonpans (*blàr Shliabh-a-Chlamhain*) and of Duke William after the battle of Culloden. The Gael carried their fellow creatures whom they had had to wound in the heat of battle (*ann am braise na caonnaig*) on their backs, to leave them in places of safety (*ionadan dìdeinn*) with love (*seirce*) and with kindness.”

This at last is the clear voice of the Gael, not a translation. It is also the voice of all those who have tried to treat their enemy according to the rules of war, only to discover that the enemy sees them not as soldiers but as terrorists. “In return (*Ann an éirig sin*) when the English got the Gael in their power (*fo ’m meachainn*) they were doing away with them (*a cuir às daibh*), not like men but like venomous beasts (*mar bhiasdan nimhe*). In the first ages of the world when human beings were ignorant savages (*arbhalaich gun eòlas*) wandering in wild tribes (*a’ falbh nam fineachan fiat*) on the face of the earth, there was mercy and compassion (*treòcair agus tlus*) in the Gael, as may be seen in the ballads of the Féinn (*ann an Dànabh nam Féine*), and especially in the advice given by Ossian to his son Oscar before the Battle of Tulach-Soire:

*Lùb an t-uaibhreach ’s na buail am fann  
Am fuil nan truagh na truail do lann,  
— Cobhair an deòrach na fheum,  
'Na ob is na sir an cogadh.”*

It means: “Lay low the proud and strike not the weak, / Pollute not your blade in the blood of the wretched / – Give the refugee help in his need, / Don’t refuse war or go out to seek it.”

I haven’t been able to put my finger on this from elsewhere. Perhaps it’s from a version of “A’ Mhuileartach”, which usually begins *Latha dhuinn air Tulach Soire* – “One day we were on Tulach Soire.” James Macpherson had made these Ossianic ballads famous all over Europe and America. Napoleon is said to have slept with Cesarotti’s translation of them under his pillow during his campaigns. They were already regarded as the national epic of Scotland. And here we see John Mackenzie putting them forward as a fundamental charter of military behaviour – a sort of Geneva Convention in verse.

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