

Charlie's Year (24): The Prince's escape

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ROBERT Chambers tells us in his “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” of 1840 that during the three days after Culloden the duke of Cumberland’s forces seized 30 pieces of cannon, 2,320 firelocks, 190 broadswords, 37 barrels of powder and 22 carts of ammunition. In “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” of 1844 John Mackenzie makes this into 30 pieces of cannon (*deich canonan fichead*), 2,320 guns (*dà mhìle trì-cheud agus fichead gunna*), 199 swords (*aon cheud ceitheir fichead a’s naoi’ diag claidheamh*), 37 barrels of powder (*seachd diag ’ar fhichead baraille fùdair*), and 20 carts of bullets large and small (*làn fichead cairt de pheileirean eadar bheag as mhòr*).

Three right out of five. It’s not that Mackenzie has access to different statistics; it’s just that he would never pass an exam in maths through the medium of Gaelic. But he enjoys telling a good story, and no story is better than the Prince’s escape.

It seemed clear enough at first what would happen. The Jacobites had fought two good battles and one bad one; they would continue the fight. Charles ordered the remains of his army to rendezvous at Ruthven in Badenoch and await further orders, while he took himself quickly to France to organise proper support. He assumed there would be plenty of French ships on the west coast waiting to take him off.

He had completely underestimated the power of his enemy on land and sea and their determination to wipe out not only himself, his friends and his army, but every last vestige of support for his cause amongst the ordinary people of Scotland.

Chambers tells the story briskly, and Mackenzie follows. Charles was led off the field of Culloden “by one Edward Burke, a poor Highlander, who usually acted as a sedan-carrier in Edinburgh, but was now servant to Mr Alexander Macleod of Muiravonside”. They were joined by Charles’s closest friends, Sir Thomas Sheridan, John O’Sullivan, Colonel O’Neill and John Hay. They made their way through the Fraser country, Tordarroch, Aberarder, Farraline, Gortuleg (where they met Lord Lovat) and on to Fort Augustus, where they were seen riding rapidly through the ruins of the fort at 2 a.m.

Reaching Glengarry’s ruined castle of Invergarry two hours before daybreak, they lay down to sleep. Chambers: “They slept till mid-day, when Edward Burke, having fortunately caught two salmon in the water of Garry, they had a better dinner than they expected, though the only drink they could procure was the pure element from which their meat had been taken.”

Mackenzie makes a lot of this, and it looks as if he had another source. Since Burke was the eighteenth-century equivalent of a taxi-driver, no doubt he enjoyed telling the story ever afterwards, assuming he survived. “When they awoke about mid-day they had nothing to put towards their mouths (*cha robh dad aca chuireadh iad gu’m bial*), but Edward Burke saw a fishing-rod leaning against the castle with hook and line, the fish were about that time rising thick in the stream (*a bristeadh gu dlù san t-sruth*), and Edward Burke set about catching a few (*chaidh Imhear Burc air tì beagan a ghlacadh*).

“Edward was never a great fisherman (*na bhrod iasgair*), in his own opinion or anyone else’s, he thought anyway he could catch a few trout, and luckily on the third cast (*air an treas siabadh*) he hooked a salmon (*theum e bradan*)! And soon he had killed another big grilse (*geadag*). When they had boiled the fish they ate it with nothing but a drink of the pure clear water in which it had been reared (*deoch dheth an fhìr-uisg’ shoilleir anns an deach àrach*).”

The Prince and Burke exchanged clothes, and that day they rode to the house of Donald Cameron of Glenpean on Loch Arkaig, which they reached at 9 p.m. Next day, Friday 18 April, they headed north and west towards Morar, and stayed that night at Mewboll (*Miath-Poll*), where they were well entertained. Chambers says that “there being no longer any road,

they were here obliged to abandon their horses, and begin to walk on foot”, but this is obviously country which Mackenzie knows well, and he adjusts the geography: *thainig orr’ an cuid each fhàgail ann an Gleann-Peighinn, agus triall da’n cois*. “They were obliged to leave their horses in Glen Pean, and walk on foot.”

They reached a place called Oban (*na h-Obun*) near the head of Loch Morar where they slept in a *bothan-chaorach* (“a wretched little shieling or hovel, used for shearing sheep”) near the corner of a wood.

Next day, Sunday 20 April, they walked south again to Glenbiasdale in Arisaig. Here it’s Chambers who makes a fuss: “Charles and his three attendants crossed, with inconceivable pain and difficulty, one of those ranges of lofty and rugged hills, which, alternately with lochs or arms of the sea, penetrate the country at this part of the West Highlands.” Mackenzie is having none of that. *Ghabh iad thar a’ gharbhlaich*, he says simply. “They crossed the rough country.”

At Glenbiasdale a letter arrived from Lord George Murray at Ruthven. He blamed Charles’s chief advisers for the defeat at Culloden and resigned his own command, but assumed the enterprise would continue – one or two thousand men were there, ready to defend Jacobite territory as best they could. Charles replied that he was on his way to France, determined either to secure adequate military assistance “or at least to procure you such terms as you would not obtain otherwise”.

So Charles also expected the struggle to continue, but his letter was taken as a signal to disband, and that is what they did. Mackenzie does not mention these letters, for his concern is with the exciting story we know today, and with the people of the west and the islands.

Young Clanranald and others now arrived at Glenbiasdale with the news that “the western seas were much beset by English vessels, so that the Prince could scarcely hope to make an immediate escape”. This, says Chambers, was “staggering intelligence” to the Prince, or as Mackenzie puts it, *stad e greis ann an ioma-chomhairl’*: “he was racked for a while with indecision”. He thought of reviving the struggle, or of trusting himself to the MacLeods in Skye; young Clanranald suggested he stay in the hills of Arisaig till someone could “take a trip to the isles, and look out for a ship” to take him away. Mackenzie, with his local knowledge, puts this differently: *gus am faighte urra chinnteach a rachadh do Leòghas a cheannach saitheich anns am fàradh e seòladh às an rìoghachd*, “till a specific person could be found who could go to Lewis and buy a vessel to take him out of the country”.

It makes sense. Ocean-going vessels didn’t lie in Lochboisdale or Lochmaddy waiting to be picked up any day of the week. Only in Stornoway could you do that.

Mackenzie makes Charles seem quite resolute. *Thuir am Prionns’ nach robh e idir air son fantainn na b’ fhaid’ air mòr-thìr, gu’m b’ annsa leis e-féin a chleth a measg nan eilean*. “The Prince said he did not want to stay on the mainland any longer, that he would rather hide himself amongst the islands.” Chambers, on the other hand, seems to imply that the Prince’s mind was made up for him when that trusty old pilot, Donald Macleod of Gualtergill, appeared on the scene, having just brought Aeneas Macdonald the banker from Barra with a sum of French money. (Fuddled by Chambers’s spelling, Mackenzie makes the name *Gualtair-Cill*, but it should be *Galtraigil*.)

Charles asked Donald if he would bring letters from him to MacLeod of Dunvegan and MacDonald of Sleat, throwing himself on their protection. He was still naively convinced that these two men would help him, despite all they had done to subvert his cause. Donald refused: “Far from being well inclined to him, they were at this moment employed with their men in searching for him at a place not above ten or twelve miles distant.”

So it was decided to head for the isles, and on the evening of 24 April in Loch nan Uamh – the very place he had arrived nine months earlier – Charles took to an open eight-oared boat (*ochd-ramhach*) along with O’Sullivan, O’Neill, Edward Burke and another seven persons. “Donald Macleod, acting as pilot,” says Chambers, “sat at the stern, with Charles betwixt his knees.” Mackenzie: *Shuidh e air an àilm agus shuidh am Prionnsa sios eadar a*

dha chois a chum is nach faict' e. “He sat at the helm and the Prince sat down between his two legs so as not to be seen.”

They headed straight into bad weather across the Minch, and what follows in Mackenzie is one of the passages of splendid Gaelic prose that attracted me to his work in the first place, long before I discovered that it was basically a translation. As always, I give his words exactly as they stand in the first edition of his book. *Thog na tonnan gàireach, càir-gheal, an cinn le bairlinn bhristeach, a's ged a bha Dòmhnuille tric a's mìnig a gabhail na linne eadar na h-eileanan a's mòr-thìr, cha robh e òidhche no latha riabh air Chuan-sgìth cho stoirmeil rithe so, agus bha 'n t-sian a dortadh a nuas mar dhìle, 's an oidhche cho dòrcha is nach robh fios aig duine dheth an sgioba c'ait' an robh iad, no ciod an t-eirthir a bha fo sròin.*

I would translate: “The roaring foam-white waves raised their heads with a breaking surge, and although Donald had sailed between the islands and the mainland more times than he could remember, he had never experienced a day or a night on the Minch as stormy as this, for the elements were pouring down like a flood, and the night was so dark that none of the crew knew where they were, or what coast was under her prow.”

Was Mackenzie a translator, or a writer of original Gaelic prose? Judge for yourselves from Chambers's original. “The wind blew a tempest; the waves of the Atlantic rose with tumultuous fury; and it was altogether a night surpassing in danger any that Macleod, an experienced boatman, had ever before seen upon that wild sea. To add to their distress, the rain poured down in torrents, and they had neither pump nor compass. In the darkness of the night, none of the crew knew where they were.”

The storm carried them sixty miles in nine or ten hours. “They landed at Rosnish, the south-east angle of the isle of Benbecula,” says Chambers. It's actually the north-east angle, but in any case Mackenzie calls it *Ros-innis an Uidhist a chinne-deas* – “Rossinish in South Uist”. I'm not sure that Benbecula was thought of as an island in its own right in those days. After all, *Beinn na bhFadhla* just means “the Hill Ground of the Fords”.

They drew up their boat on dry land, cornered a cow (*ghlac iad bò*), quickly slaughtered it (*ghrad spad iad i*), and cooked some of its meat using a pot (*prais*) and four pecks of oatmeal (*ceitheir peiceanan de mhin choirce*) that they had brought with them.

Welcome to the real world, Charles Edward Louis Philip Casimir Stuart.

11 June 2004