Charlie's Year (26): The Prince in Lewis

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

FOR his book "Highland Songs of the Forty-Five" the late John Lorne Campbell examined a huge body of Jacobite verse in Gaelic, and he says: "Nowhere is there a sign that the Highlanders were prepared to consider the defeat at Culloden as anything more than a prelude to the renewal of hostilities, in which they would very soon avenge that disaster and the humiliation of the Disarming and Disclothing legislation, applied, with typical eighteenth-century Hanoverian impartiality and far-sightedness, to loyal and disloyal clans alike. This is the dominant note that runs through the poetry composed after Culloden."

Compared to the freshness of these songs John Mackenzie's prose history "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844 is cauld kale het up. In TV terms it's neither news nor opinion but documentary. But it gives us what those songs can't give, an overview – a digest in Gaelic of the wide range of materials brought together in English by Robert Chambers in his "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" of 1840, plus Mackenzie's very own "value added".

With regard to renewing the war, Chambers says: "For three weeks after the battle of Culloden, no attempt was made to penetrate that tract of the central and west Highlands, which formed the chief stronghold of the Jacobite clans." And Mackenzie says: *Fad fhichead latha an deigh blàr Chul-Fhodair cha deach duine de dh' fheachd an Diùc an còir nan Garbh-Chrioch . . .*

On 8 May 1746 a meeting of Jacobite leaders – Lochiel, Lovat, young Clanranald, John Roy Stewart, Secretary Murray and others – took place at Muirlagan near the head of Loch Arkaig. Murray had £38,000 which had been landed by a French vessel at Arisaig. It was agreed that the western clans would rendezvous (*gu'n càmpaicheadh* is Mackenzie's word) on the 15th at Achnacarry and that the eastern clans – Frasers, Mackintoshes, MacPhersons, Athollmen – would rise on the same day.

Mar sin, says Mackenzie, *thòisich an tògbhail as ùr*: the rising began again. Curiously, this appears to be his translation of Chambers's "This attempt to renew the war came to nothing." The fact is that they were too late, because it was on 8 May that Loudon began his march from Inverness to Lochaber with 1,700 men. Culloden had taught the Jacobite leaders that logistics were essential – buying cattle for food, bringing ammunition from Arisaig – and these were totally disrupted. "Mr Murray had the greater part of his French money buried in secret places, £15,000 being sunk in a rivulet near the head of Loch Arkaig, and £12,000 near the foot of the same lake."

Mackenzie says that what was buried at the head of Loch Arkaig was *cuig mìle Ginni dheth* – five thousand guineas of it. If we hadn't had so much experience by now of his translating numbers inaccurately, I'd have said he had inside information. But just think – if Mackenzie could so misrepresent printed information sitting in front of him in 1844, how many more mistakes of that kind were made by tired, worried men in wartime?

Another of Mackenzie's amiable eccentricities is his place-names, and we'll find far more of these than sums of money as Charles wanders round the Highlands and Islands. Achnacarry is rendered *Acha-na-garaidh* as if it were "the Field of the Fox's Den" – a Freudian slip, perhaps. It's *Achadh na Cairidh*, "the Field of the Fish-Trap". Leith, *Lìte*, Mackenzie turns into *Léibhte*, as if it had something to do with *Sléibhte*, "Hills, Common Grazings", like *Sléibhte* (Sleat) in Skye. Again he's trying to make sense of it. Professor Watson thought it had something to do with Welsh *llaith* "wet". A very old name.

Mackenzie does better when Chambers talks of "most of the jails north of the Forth" filled with Jacobite prisoners. The Forth is a problem in Gaelic. In Highland Perthshire the river was *an Abhainn Dubh*. I've heard that applied to the firth as well, but I believe the correct name is *an Linne Foirthe*. So what does Mackenzie say? *Gach prìosan tuath air Port-na-Bann-righ*! "Every jail north of Queensferry"!

The highest marks he gets for place-names are where Chambers tells of some Jacobite aristocrats who escaped to Norway and were promptly thrown by the king of Denmark into "the castle of Bergen" – *seanna Chaisteal dubh Bhaile-na-Buirbhe*, Mackenzie calls it, as if he were there every day. (Bergen is *Björgvín* in Norwegian.) When I noticed this I assumed at first that he was getting it from the Harris poet Màiri nighean Alastair Ruaidh, who says to MacLeod in one of her songs:

O bhaile na Boirbhe
Sann a stoidhleadh tu an toiseach.

("From the city of Bergen / Did your first title spring.") Màiri's songs were woven in and out of Mackenzie's memories of growing up in Meallan Teàrlaich, where they were sung by a tailor called Alexander MacRae who died when Mackenzie was only 27. But no, "the old black Castle of Bergen" sounds more like something out of a folk-tale. Which one, I wonder?

On Friday 25 April 1746 Charles and his companions (Donald Macleod, Edward Burke, O'Neal, Sullivan) reached Rossnish in Benbecula. Mackenzie calls the island *Beinne-Mhaol*, as if it were "Bare Hill". The storm that brought them continued for fourteen hours: *ceithir latha diag*, says Mackenzie, "fourteen days", then he rightly says that they left on 29 April. They set sail for Stornoway, says Chambers: *ghabh iad orra uidhe chuain fhiadhaich, a leigeadh fo sròin*, says Mackenzie, meaning I think that "they took upon themselves to allow the way of the wild ocean under her prow".

Donald Macleod hoped to find a ship in Stornoway that would take them to France. Another storm came on, however. "The sea was churned into white foam (*dh'éirich an linne na caoraibh gheala*)," says Mackenzie, "until they could sail no more to windward (*air chor is nach b' urrainn iad giùlan n'a b' fhaid' air fuaradh*) and were driven to Scalpay (*leig iad ruith leatha dh' ionnsaidh an Eilein-ghlais*)."

Scalpay was a MacLeod island, potentially hostile. Sullivan and the Prince pretended to be father and son, calling themselves Sinclairs (*b'ann do Chlann na Ceairde bha 'm Prionns' agus O'Suilibhan*), "merchantmen who had been shipwrecked in a voyage to Orkney". Mackenzie has more on this than Chambers. They claimed to be Orkneymen "whose ship had been broken into fragments on the Dubh Hirteach, a bad skerry that lies in the ocean west of Islay" (*air an deach an long a bhristeadh na sgealban air an Dù'-Irtich, droch sgeir a ta na laidhe sa' chuan air taobh Siar Ile*). Mackenzie's love for the pre-1800 Gaelic Bible comes out in that spelling *ta* for *tha*.

Donald Campbell, tacksman (*màlanach*) of Scalpay, showed them great kindness (*ged bu Chaimbeulach e*, Mackenzie adds gratuitously). He lent his own boat to Macleod, who went on to Stornoway to look for a ship. Word came on 3 May that he had succeeded. Another boat was manned, and Charles and his companions set sail for Stornoway. But the wind was against them, and they ran into Loch Seaforth (*Loch Sìth-phort*), from where they had twenty miles to walk to the town.

The ground was pathless and very wet, and it was noon on Monday 5 May before they reached Arnish (Chambers *Arynish*, Mackenzie *Rugha-àr-Innis*). Here they were about half a mile from the town, says Chambers: *ma uighe mìle do'n bhàile*, says Mackenzie, correcting him. He knew Lewis well enough.

They sent word to Macleod, who came out with provisions and guided them to Mrs Mackenzie of Kildun's house at Aignish. The Prince went to bed, but when Macleod returned to Stornoway he found the townspeople "in commotion" (Chambers), *nan armabh* ("up in arms", Mackenzie). Chambers knows why: "His servant having become tipsy, blabbed for whom the vessel was designed, at the same time hinting that the Prince was in a condition to take it by force." What's more, Chambers points out, it was confirmed by a chain of alarms passed by ministers from South Uist to Harris to Lewis.

Mackenzie doesn't give any sources for the rumour (*sgeula buaitheam*), but in his version it's a lot more frightening: *Gu'n robh am Prionnsa agus feachd lionmhor an deigh tighinn air tìr aig Rugha àr-Innis a los am baile ghlacadh*. "That the Prince had landed at Arnish with a sizeable force to take the town."

Macleod pacified the citizens by telling them the truth. Then as now, Stornoway was a place of trade, and they reacted much as the traders of Edinburgh and Glasgow had done. As they stood to lose everything, they simply asked that the Prince go away. There would be no ship for him because, as Mackenzie explains, for fear of the English fleet (*le eagal nan luingeas Sasunnach*) constantly on the lookout in the Western Ocean, Macleod could not find a single man in the whole island who was willing to bring Charles to France.

It was a tense time, but finally they got away from Aignish in a small boat with two of a crew. *Dh' fhag iad an t-Eilean Leòghasach*, says Mackenzie. I've never heard it called that before.

They thought first of going to Orkney, but the men refused. Charles suggested "Bollein in Kintail", says Chambers; I've never heard of the place, and probably Mackenzie hadn't either, for he just says that Charles asked them to make for Kintail. Is it *Both Luinge*, for *Camas Luinge*, Camuslinnie?

In the end they sailed back south until some large vessels appeared – two or four in number, depending whether you believe Mackenzie or Chambers. "They put into the small desert isle of Eiurn or Iffurt, near Harris," says Chambers. This is Eilean Euford or Iubhaird in Loch Sealg, at Lemreway in Lochs; Eiurn sounds like Loch Odhairn at Gravir next door, but there's no island there. Ross-shire man or no, Mackenzie had clearly never heard of it: *leig iad ruith leis a bhàta dh' ionnsaidh an Eilein-Iaruinn faisg air na h-Earadh,* he says.

There was no iron, but plenty of fish. Some fishermen there had "fled to the interior", believing Charles and his companions to be a press-gang (*luchd-preasaich*) from the warships. They had left their catch on the rocks to dry (*air an leacaich air son a chaoineachadh*) in large quantities, and the fugitives fell upon it eagerly. Cod and ling (*trosg a's langaichean*), says Mackenzie, but as he has never heard of the island, he's probably only guessing.

They spent four days on the island. "His lodging here was a miserable hovel, the roof of which was so imperfect, that it had to be covered with a sailcloth." In translating, Mackenzie throws in a quotation: *Cha robh de dh' fhardach ac' air an òidhche sin ach bothan beag air a thughadh cho olc is nach "bu luaithe sian a' muigh na snighe staigh," ach air dhaibh seòl a bhàta sgaoileadh tharais air, bha iad rudeigin seasgair*. ("Their only accommodation that night was a little bothy so badly thatched that 'the wind blew no faster outside than the soot-drops fell inside', but once they had spread the sail of the boat over it, they were fairly watertight.")

Yet again I get the feeling of a *sgeulachd*, and I now realise why Mackenzie called his book "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa". The word *eachdraidh* plugs us into traditional narrative, into some of the great yarns of the Gaelic past like "Eachdraidh Mhànais" and "Eachdraidh a' Cheabharnaich".

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