

## Charlie's Year (27): to Harris, Uist – and St Kilda?

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“ONE DAY, while the rest were asleep, the Prince and Burke employed themselves socially in preparing a dish of fish, when the latter, remembering a piece of butter which Lady Kildun had given them, went for it to the boat, but found it jammed into a mass of crumbled bread. He thought it useless; but the Prince, saying that bread could never spoil butter, took it, melted it, and presented it with the fish, which it greatly improved. While thus humbling himself, it is curious to learn that he and the gentlemen of his party ate apart from the boatmen, though both parties had no better knives and forks than their fingers, and no table or chairs but the bare rock.”

So fish fried in breadcrumbs was served on Eilean Iubhaird at Lemreway between 7 and 10 May 1746, according to Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" (1840). It wasn't to John Mackenzie's taste when he abridged and translated the book as "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" in 1844, but the idea of the prince who excelled at everything, like Peter the Great of Russia, was entirely in the spirit of Gaelic *eachdraidh*, and he chose another item from Chambers's menu. *Dh' fhuin am Prionnsa bonach de mhin chorc' agus de dh' eanachail na bà a cheannaich iad bho bhaintighearna Chill-Duinn*. "The Prince baked a cake of oatmeal and of the brains of the cow they had bought from Lady Kildun."

Burke did most of the cooking, but when the Prince laid his hand to that work, says Chambers, he "usually excelled his humble follower". Like Alastair Campbell, Mackenzie leaves out the caveats. *Thug e barrachd orr' uile gu léir*, he says simply. "He excelled them all."

On 10 May the party sailed south. They put into Scalpay, *an t-Eilean Glas*, meaning to repay Donald Campbell for the boat he had given them the week before. "Before they had got time to land, four men came up," says Chambers, and Mackenzie adds: *le sàr choiseachd*, "walking briskly". They decided to send Burke to meet them, "before the Prince should hazard his person on the island", says Chambers, *a raghainn air a' Phrionns' a dhol ann an cunnard a bheatha, le leigeadh leo tighinn dlù do'n bhàta*, says Mackenzie: "rather than endanger the Prince's life by letting them come close to the boat".

They were right to be cautious, for it became clear that the four men wanted to seize the boat. Burke leapt back on board and pushed off. Other sources tell us that Donald Campbell had had to leave the island and go into hiding for the hospitality he had shown the Prince.

The story at this point is like one of the epic voyages of the Celtic past – St Brendan's, or Maol Dùin's. There again, the *eileanaich* of the time were used to being blown to *tìrean aineoil*. On account of the calm (*thaobh nach robh deò ghaoithe á adhar*) they had to row all night, though they were faint from hunger. A breeze arose at daybreak, and they hoisted their sail to catch it. Having no fresh water they made do with "meal, stirred into brine" (Chambers), *le stapaig do mhin chorc' air a deanamh air mear-shal* (Mackenzie). *Stapag* is one of a set of words for combinations of raw oatmeal with dairy products, whisky or water; *mear-shal* is literally "liquid salt".

Chambers calls it "this nauseous food", Mackenzie *a' bheatha thruagh neo-bhlasta so*. Two more points are made: they take away the taste with a dram (*sgailc*) of brandy; Charles declares that if he ever mounts a throne he will never forget those who dined with him that day. This allows Chambers to introduce one synonym for *stapag* ("salt-water drammock") and Mackenzie two: *dràmag, fuarag*.

Suddenly an English man-o'-war appeared and "gave them chase" (Chambers), *leig fir na luinge air ball ruith le chum an glacadh* ("the men of the ship set a course to catch them", Mackenzie). "English", *Sasunnach*, is the word used by both sources. Charles says he'll "be sunk rather than be taken" – *is raghnaiche leam dol do'n aigin na bhi air mo ghlacadh*.

Notice all these Gaelic seafaring phrases that you wouldn't hear today. It's no surprise that Mackenzie had them. His younger brother James was a sailor, and when John H. Dixon, author of a book about Gairloch, met James as an old man in the 1880s he says he "still affects the blue neckerchief and dark serge clothes of the sea-faring man, topped with a Highland bonnet of the Prince Charlie type".

Chambers tells how the man-o'-war pursued them for three leagues then found itself becalmed. Mackenzie: *Lean an long air an ruaig iad fad naoi mìle: fa-dheòigh, thainig rag*

*fhè is cha gluaiseadh seòl bho chrannabh na luinge air chor 's nach b'fhada bha bàta Phrionnsa deanamh falach cuain oirre.* (“The ship continued to pursue them for nine miles: at last there came a dead calm and no sail could stir from the masts of the ship, so that soon the Prince’s boat was hidden from her by the sea.”)

They crept in among the rocks at Rodel Point – *Rugha Raoghadail na h-Earadh*. Chambers says nothing of what they did here, but Mackenzie seems to have a different source, for he is quite circumstantial: *Air dhaibh an anail a leigeadh an sin agus slige bhrannaidh an fhir òl, bhuanach iad air an aghaidh.* “When they had rested there and drunk a shell of brandy each, they continued their voyage.”

Points of detail like this raise a question about sources. Did Mackenzie have a text other than Chambers’s in front of him, or did he have the story from oral tradition? Well, there were only about half a dozen people on the voyage. O’Neil and O’Sullivan finished up in France and wrote their memoirs; others, like Donald Macleod and Ned Burke, also survived, and either wrote down their stories themselves, or dictated them to an Episcopalian minister in Leith called Robert Forbes, who wrote them down, and so they got into print in various ways before being published properly in 1895–96 as “The Lyon in Mourning”. I’ll look into this next time, but will content myself just now by saying that it looks as if Mackenzie has in front of him not only Chambers’s book, but also what Forbes had taken down from Ned Burke.

Once again the voyagers were pursued by a warship, and they put in at Uisgebhagh in Benbecula. As soon as they were ashore a storm blew up which swept their pursuers away from the coast. Charles was so elated by “the double escape he had made” (Chambers), *cho caol sa’ thearainn e air an dà àm so* (Mackenzie), that he couldn’t help exclaiming that he believed he was not fated to die by either “weapon or water” (Chambers), *uisge no teine* (Mackenzie). He was right, but many others died for him.

It was 11 May 1746, and Charles’s rural idyll began here. One of the boatmen caught a crab “which he held up to the Prince with a joyful exclamation”. Charles seized a pail or bucket (Chambers), *spùidsear* or *taoman* (Mackenzie), and ran to receive it. They filled it with crabs (Chambers), *iomadh seòrsa maoraich* (“many kinds of shellfish”, Mackenzie), then set off for a hut “about two miles inland” (Chambers), *mu uidhe thrì mìle bho’n chladach* (Mackenzie).

Charles insisted on carrying the bucket. Chambers doesn’t say why; Mackenzie says it was because everyone else had his own burden. When they got to the “hovel” (Chambers), *bothan* (Mackenzie), the door was so low that they had to go in “upon their hands and knees” (Chambers), *air a màgan* (“crawling”, Mackenzie). What neither writer explains is that *bothain àirigh* like this were for young women and children – they were used in summer for herding and dairying, and the doors were made small to keep out weather and men. Charles ordered Burke “to improve the hovel by lowering the threshold” (Chambers), *an starsach a thogail agus claghach sios foipe chum an dorais a dheanamh n’a b’ àirde* (“to lift the threshold and dig down below it to make the door higher”, Mackenzie).

Charles now sent for Clanranald, who lived not very far away, at Nunton. This was the elderly Benbecula man who had refused to come out for Charles the previous July, and had kept his Uistmen at home while his mainland-born son raised the men of Moidart, Arisaig, Morar and Ardnamurchan. He came immediately, bringing Spanish wines, provisions, shoes, stockings (Chambers), *aran a’s ìm, a’s feòil, a’s càise gu leòir, maille ri leth-dusan léintean, daothainn bhròg agus osanan* (“plenty of bread, butter, meat and cheese, along with half-a-dozen shirts and a good supply of shoes and stockings”, Mackenzie). In Chambers’s words, he found Charles “reclining in a hovel little larger than an English hog-stye, and perhaps more filthy”, but Mackenzie has no taste for comparisons unfavourable to the Gael, and he contents himself by saying that after a day or two *anns a’ bhothan dhiblidh seo* (“in this vile hut”) Charles moved, at Clanranald’s suggestion, to a safer place, *Gleann-Crùbasdail* in South Uist, which Chambers calls “the Forest-house of Glencoradale”. He seems from other sources to have walked across the sea-ford between the two islands.

Charles spent twenty-two happy days at Coradale, from 15 May to 5 June. The British army and navy had lost him completely, even though there was a reward of £30,000 on his head and they were looking for him everywhere. “Among all who were employed in this duty,” says Chambers, “no man seems to have been more eager than John Campbell of Mamore (afterwards fourth Duke of Argyll).” Clearly back to translating Chambers,

Mackenzie gets this wrong: *Cha'n robh an Albainn gu léir, neach a shanntaich an duais, ach aon duine, agus be sin Iain Caimbeul a Mhaim-Mhòir.* (“No one in all Scotland coveted the prize, except one man, and that was John Campbell of Mamore.”)

What is of interest however is not John Mackenzie’s little mistake in 1844 but General Campbell’s big one in 1746. A report came in that Charles had taken refuge in St Kilda, and off went Campbell with a large fleet (Chambers), *dà long-chogaidh agus ochd birlinnean làn feachda* (“two warships and eight troop-carriers”, Mackenzie).

When Campbell’s force appeared over the horizon the *Hirtich* fled to the caves and the mountain-tops, and it was only after a great deal of trouble that the general was able to make his mission known to them. “Where is the pretender?” he asks in Chambers’s version (Mackenzie translates *am Prionns’*).

They had never heard of such a person. They said, however, “that they heard a report, probably communicated by some stray fishermen, that their laird (MacLeod) had been at war with a woman a great way abroad, and that he had got the better of her”.

A woman? Mackenzie has the explanation. He translates: *nach cual iad riamh iomradh air a lethid de dhuine, is nach mò chual' iad facal mu chogadh, ach aon bhoireannach mòr Gallda da'm b'ainm Mòrag a bha cogadh ri Mac-Leòid, agus gu'n cual' iad gun do chaill i 'm blàr*, “that they had never heard of such a person, nor had they heard a word about any war, except for one great foreign woman called Mòrag who was fighting MacLeod, and that they had heard she lost the battle”.

Mòrag was Prince Charles’s code-name. Mackenzie sees no need to comment further, but Chambers says: “The general returned on board, to retrace his long disagreeable voyage, with feelings which need not be described.”

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