

Charlie's Year (28): Corodale

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“HIS dress was then a tartan short-coat, and vest of the same, got from Lady Clanranald; his nightcap all patched with soot-drops, his shirt, hands, and face, patched with the same; a short kilt, tartan hose, and Highland brogs; his upper coat being English cloth.”

This is an eye-witness description of Prince Charles Edward Stuart in his bothy at Corodale in South Uist at the end of May 1746. It comes from the 1840 edition of Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6". The words are not those of Chambers himself but of Hugh Macdonald of Baleshare in North Uist. Lady Margaret Macdonald of Sleat had sent him to bring Charles the newspapers and to warn him that the military authorities knew that he was somewhere in the Outer Isles and had sent several large bodies of troops to look for him.

Now see how John Mackenzie translates Baleshare's words in "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844. *Bha e air an àm sin air éideadh ann an cota-gearr breacain, agus siste-cota dheth an aodach chianda a fhuair a bho bhainntighearna Mhic-'Ic-Ailein, feileadh goirid de bhreacan, sgàrlaid, osanan de chatas garbh màdair agus brògan baltach, fraocharanach; bha churac-òidhche balla-bhreac le sile-sùithe, (no mar a theireir ann an cuid de dh' àitean snithe-dubh) bha léine, aodann, agus a làmhun dubh leis an ni chianda, agus fhiasag gun bhearradh mu leth-oirleach air fad.*

Let's look at this in detail. First of all we see that Mackenzie says the same as Chambers about the short-coat and vest. The "vest" comes out as *siste-cota*, given by Dwelly as *siostracota*, which I take to be "waistcoat" in a Gaelic pronunciation.

Then Mackenzie skips the nightcap and soot-drops and comes straight to the kilt, hose and brogues. But Chambers's "short kilt" expands into "a short kilt of scarlet tartan", and his "tartan hose" turns into "stockings of rough red caddis". Caddis, Gaelic *catas*, is given by my 1983 edition of Chambers's dictionary (yes, the same Chambers – Robert founded the firm with his brother William) as "worsted ribbon". And "Highland brogs" become "welted, patched (or toe-capped) shoes", if I understand *baltach, fraocharanach* correctly.

Now Mackenzie comes back to the scruffy nightcap, seizing the opportunity to present us with a little disquisition on soot-drops. It is spotted and speckled (*balla-bhreac*) with *sile-sùithe*, or, as is said in some places, *snithe-dubh*. As anyone who recalls the old black houses will tell you, *sile-sùithe* is "liquid soot" and *snithe* (or rather *snighe*) *dubh* is the same thing, "black ooze" – the soot from the fire in the middle of the floor impregnates the thatch above your head, and down it comes again whenever the rain falls, mixed with chicken droppings and whatever else might be up there to produce a flow of dirty black gobs that will hit you no matter how often you change your position.

You can tell that Mackenzie is translating, although admittedly Chambers's "shirt, hands, and face" become his "shirt, face, and hands" in Gaelic; but then, out of the blue, Mackenzie tells us that Charles is sporting half an inch of unshaven beard.

Where did that come from? It isn't in "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6". Did Mackenzie make it up? Did he have an oral source? Or another published one? I hope to go a little way towards answering that question next time.

Prince Charles was being quietly looked after in Corodale by Clanranald, who lived at Nunton in Benbecula. Chambers tells us that Charles sent Donald Macleod to the mainland with letters for Lochail and Secretary Murray and that when Macleod got back after eighteen days "he found the royal fugitive in a better hut than that in which he had left him, having two cow-hides stretched out upon four sticks, as an awning to cover him when asleep". According to Mackenzie the new bothy was specially built for him, *agus chaidh leabaidh chlàr a chuir suas ann agus dà sheiche gun chairteadh a chuir tarsuinn air dà mhaide os a ceann chùim a deanamh n'a bu sheasgair:* "and a bed of boards had been put up for him there with two untanned hides stretched upon two sticks over him to make him more comfortable".

We've found Mackenzie to be least reliable when it comes to figures. But then, perhaps the bed was against the wall, so only two bedposts were needed?

There's an idyllic quality about Corodale which Angus Peter Campbell has successfully recaptured in his novel "An Oidhche mus do Sheòl Sinn". Charles felt safe enough to go

hunting deer, shooting birds and fishing for lythe (*fhliùghaichean*) with hand-lines. Clanranald provided what Chambers calls “a dozen of stout gillies” to look after him; I’ve always thought there was something a bit patronising about this word “gillies”, and I’m glad to see Mackenzie turning it into *daoine*. Men.

It couldn’t last, of course. There was a reward of £30,000 on Charles’s head, and a militia force consisting of 1,500 Campbells, MacLeods and MacDonalDs was searching “*gach cùil a’s ciall*”, as Mackenzie says in quotation marks, “every nook and cranny”. I’m sure *ciall* should be *cial*, given by the dictionaries as “the side or brim of a vessel”. Chambers actually has a tale – which Mackenzie omits – of how Charles and his companions were betrayed by a starving young boy whom they had fed and clothed after he stumbled upon their hiding-place. The boy went straight to the militia. “Fortunately,” says Chambers, “they did not believe his tale, and only treated him with ridicule.”

I suspect that the real truth is that as these were Highland militia, they were simply going through the motions. They didn’t *want* to know. After all, Lady Margaret Macdonald, who appears to have known perfectly well where the Prince was, was married to the commander of one of these militias, Sir Alexander Macdonald of Sleat. Which brings us back to Baleshare’s visit.

Mackenzie tells us that when Lady Margaret asked Baleshare to go and see Charles, *cha do leig e clò le rosg gus an d’ràinig e Gleann-Biasdail far an robh am Prionns’ am falach* – “he allowed his eye no slumber till he reached Glen Biasdale where the Prince was hiding”. Then Baleshare’s own account begins, but, as we have already noticed, its English and Gaelic versions are curiously different, and I have yet to get to the bottom of this. He and Charles have a dram, then sit down to dinner. In the Gaelic version the dram is drunk from a *slige* or “shell” – a common idiom, but are we to take it literally?

During dinner, Boisdale (Clanranald’s brother) arrives unexpectedly. In the English version he gets straight to the news – Charles is being hunted in Barra – but in Gaelic *be chiad seanachas a thuirt e “gun b’ fhearr, deireadh cuirme na toiseach sabaid,” agus thòisich e air ithe “gun chuireadh gun altachadh.”* That is, the first thing he says is “that the end of a feast is better than the start of a fight”, and he starts eating “without invitation or grace”.

Charles, says Mackenzie, was charmed by this, and declared that if he ever ascended the throne, he would have *aon dinnear Ghàèlach* (one Highland dinner) with his friends in London. This reflects a phrase of Chambers’s, that “if he had never so much ado, he’d be one night merry with his Highland friends”.

“I’m not quite sure about that,” Boisdale replies frankly in Mackenzie’s version. “My ancestor Donald MacDonald, *Mac ’ic Ailein*, fought seven battles in the cause of yours (Robert Bruce) but after every kindness King Charles would not admit to seeing him when he reached his palace (*an deigh gach caoimhneis cha leigeadh Rìgh Tearlach air gu faiceadh se e ’nuair a ruigeadh e lùchairt*).”

O Fhir Bhaòsdail, says the Prince, *na bi garbh suathadh seanna chreuchdan, ma gheibh mise mo chòir air ais cha tréig, mi na Gàèil gu bràch*. This exchange is pretty much in line with Chambers, who gives Charles’s reply as: “Boisdale, don’t be rubbing up old sores, for if I came home, the case would be otherwise with me.”

Prior to this, in Chambers’s version only, there’s another interesting exchange. “I starts the question,” Baleshare tells us, “if his Highness would take it amiss if I should tell him the greatest objections against him in Great Britain. He said not. I told that popery and arbitrary government were the two chiefest. He said it was only bad constructions his enemies put on’t. ‘Do you know, Mr Macdonald,’ he says, ‘what religion are all the princes in Europe of?’ I told him I imagined they were of the same established religion of the nation they lived in. He told me then they had little or no religion at all.”

The sequence of events on Baleshare’s visit is curiously different between the two languages. In Gaelic it is: dram, eating, drinking, disputation, news. In English it is: dram, eating, news, drinking, disputation. What’s more, in English there are two further twists: “Before we’d begin with our bowl, Boisdale insisted on his being shaved first, and then putting on a clean shirt, which he was importuned to do . . . we continued this drinking for *three days and three nights*.”

Does the English language bring with it its own customs? Or is it the reverse – are these Highland customs which Mackenzie omits from his Gaelic version because he’s ashamed of

them? Or am I making too much of it all? At any rate, in Mackenzie's version the very last thing Baleshare offers the company – *le mòr shaidealtas*, “with great diffidence” – is the news about the militias that provided the reason for his visit in the first place. Somehow I can't get the notion out of my head that a Gaelic phone-call is often longer than an English one because in Gaelic we're reluctant to get to the point. Is that bad?

On 14 June Prince Charles moved his court by sea to Wiay (*Eilean-Bhia*), between South Uist and Benbecula. On the 18th the party split, and the Prince, O'Neill and Burke spent two nights at Rossinish in Benbecula. They began to see “militia boats” (Chambers), *bàtaichean Fìneach nan Caimbeulach* (“the Campbells' Loch Fyne boats”, Mackenzie) beating up and down, but Macleod and O'Sullivan got through from Wiay by boat to pick them up. Seeing two men-o'-war they put in at Acarsaid Fhalaich near Loch Skiport. Here the Prince slept “in the cleft of a rock, with his bonnet drawn over his eyes”. *Chaidh am Prionns' a laidhe ann an lagan creige, air a shuaineadh 'na bhreacan agus a bhonaid air a tharruinn sìos air a shùilean.*

The noose was tightening. They got away, then came ashore again, exhausted, at the old castle of Calvay in the entrance to Loch Boisdale. But two English sails appeared, and Charles fled into the hills around Glendale with three of his companions. They spent two nights in the open with sails for blankets. Here they found out that Boisdale had been arrested, but from Kilbride House his wife sent them four bottles of brandy and other provisions. They were nearly surrounded at this point, and Charles struck out on foot for the north, “taking a couple of shirts under his arm”, and allowing no one to follow him but O'Neill.

It was 24 June, and at midnight fortune brought the two fugitives to the house of Flora MacDonald.

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