

Charlie's Year (29): Enter Flora

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IT'S about midnight near Kildonan in South Uist on Saturday 21 June 1746, and the moon is full. To the east the mountain slopes are perfectly visible and to the west line upon line of surf is rolling in to the shore.

Guided by Neil MacEachen (as we now know) and accompanied by his old friend John O'Neill, Prince Charles has walked through the hills from Lochboisdale. They reach a shieling bothy called Àirigh a' Mhuilinn. *Rinn am Prionnsa 'shìneadh ann an toman luachrach air cùl a' bhothain*, says John Mackenzie in his book "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844. "The Prince lay down in a clump of rushes behind the bothy."

He seems to have a source before him in addition to Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6". It will be Chambers's "Jacobite Memoirs" of 1834, which contains first-hand accounts by O'Neill, MacEachen, Ned Burke and others who accompanied the Prince. It's now rare, and I haven't seen a copy yet.

But then, John Mackenzie – a Gairloch man who lives in Glasgow and drinks in a Clyde Street tavern owned by his friend Artt MacLachlan, a native of Luìng in Argyll – scarcely needs books to do this job, except to remind him of dates and places in the Prince's complicated itinerary. After all, it's 1843. Men in their sixties enjoying one of MacLachlan's pints (which have been praised in song by our John) were born in the 1770s or 1780s. Many of their parents were around in 1746 and the Uibhistich and Sgitheanaich and others in MacLachlan's tavern are full of stories about the Prince's wanderings.

So what about this? O'Neill is inside, MacEachen is inside, Flora MacDonald is inside. This is no coincidence. "I have brought a friend to see you," says O'Neill to Flora. *Chaidh e air toir Thearlaich*, says Mackenzie, *agus thainig e steach do'n bhothan; chuir e fàilte shuìlbhear air Fionnaghal, a's rinn e suidh air fàilean a measg nan gruagaichean. Cha b' fhada bha e na shuidh gus an tug a' bhannarach dha làn mìos bheag Lochluinneach de ghruth 's de dh'uachdar, ni a thaitin ris, thasa gràdh, n'a b'fhearr no aon bhìadh air na bhlaib e riabh.*

This is not in Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6". Whether it's in his "Jacobite Memoirs" I don't know yet. But it fits perfectly into Mackenzie's methodology. Throughout his account Charles has been the *primus inter pares* of the Highland army, a Fionn amongst the Féinn, wading rivers, sleeping rough and performing feats of agility along with the rest. Mackenzie's rhetoric has been that of the Ossianic ballads and of traditional tales that describe the adventures (*eachdraidhean*) of kings' sons. This rhetoric has appeared in direct quotations which are certainly in none of Mackenzie's published sources, because these sources are all in English.

Now, in this passage, a third great strand of Gaelic literary tradition is evoked, that of the shieling – a women's world of summertime and intimate love-songs, for the young women and some of the children used to come up with the cattle to the summer pastures to make butter and cheese, and young men came a-courting like bees to honey. In filmic terms, with the moon shining bright and the appearance of Flora MacDonald the background music has changed, and this is it: O'Neill "went to fetch Charles," says Mackenzie, "and he came into the bothy; he greeted Flora cheerfully, and sat on a little sod of turf amongst the girls. He was not long sitting there when the dairymaid gave him a little Norse dish full of crowdie and cream, which he enjoyed, they say, more than any food he had ever tasted."

Against the subtly erotic background of shieling songs, it's highly charged stuff. Just don't ask me what a "Norse dish" is.

This feminising of the story has another purpose. A threshold has been crossed. The world of men has failed the Prince – failed everybody, really. Boisdale has been arrested, Clanranald is old and sick. Most of the principal men are gone, or wounded, or on the wrong side. The women can operate more safely, and it's into the world of women that the Prince has been deposited.

The point is this. The authorities know he's in South Uist. They're hunting high and low. They assume, rightly, that he's waiting for a French ship to take him off. He must get out of Uist, then stay well ahead of his pursuers by keeping on the move. But at the same time he needs a flow of intelligence so that he can be brought to a ship, or a ship can come to him.

His sea-journeys must be well organised and short. Flora MacDonald can get him to Skye, where she lives with her mother and stepfather. It's not where the authorities would expect him to go, as MacDonald of Sleat and MacLeod of Dunvegan refused to fight for him.

There's a naivety about Chambers's and Mackenzie's accounts at this point. Misled by his sources, Chambers thinks the Prince met Flora in Benbecula. It's down to the fact that Ormacleit Castle was burned down in 1715, and Clanranald now lived with his wife at Nunton in Benbecula, where he was born. Worse, Chambers and Mackenzie report only what goes on on the surface, because their sources are men, but the organising was now being done by women.

Chambers has some suspicion that his sources are not telling him everything. "It seems probable that one fact only of any importance is omitted here," he says – "namely, that Miss Macdonald had been brought to the hut by some previous concert, and expected there to meet with the Prince."

Mackenzie, by contrast, seems to know exactly what was said, and probably gets it right; but now that the Highland army is no more, the Prince is his hero and must be shown to be in control of his own destiny. He says (I translate): "The saying goes '*gur luaithe deoch na sgialachd*', therefore the Prince did not reveal to Flora the danger and the straits (*teanndachd*) he was in until he had finished the dish of crowdie and cream, then he said that she was able, if willing, to save him from the hands of the enemies who were so hot in his pursuit (*cho dian an tòir air*).

"Flora asked how it was that she, a mere woman of little influence, could perform such a heroic deed as that when every district was in turmoil (*fo luasgan*) for fear of the pursuers? The Prince said that she could get a pass (*Litir-cead-siubhail*) for herself and her maid from her stepfather the tacksman of Armadale, and that he could go with her in the name of a maid (*bean-mhuinntir*), dressed in woman's clothes, to her mother's house in Skye where she could hide him until all danger had passed."

There are two things to say about this. Firstly, history tells us that the cross-dressing idea actually worked, so Mackenzie claims it for Charles. He has written O'Neill out of the picture. In "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" most of the talking is done by O'Neill, the main (or only?) source for the conversation, and the idea is cooked up by O'Neill and Charles together. In reality, I think it can only have come from the women – Flora and her confidante, Lady Clanranald.

Secondly, the word *teanndachd*, "a tight spot", is as pure an evocation of heroic ballads as you can get. One of the most popular of them all is called "Teanndachd Mhór na Féinne" – "The Tightest Spot the Fenians Were Ever In". As for *is luaithe deoch na sgialachd*, "quicker is drink than story", Sheriff Nicolson devotes more than half a page of discussion to *is luaithe deoch na sgeul* in his "Gaelic Proverbs". Pointing out that *sgeul* includes news and information of any kind, he says: "There is no saying more characteristic of Highland ideas of hospitality, of which one of the first laws is to offer a drink of some kind, the best in the house, whatever it be, to a visitor."

It took a week to make the arrangements. Flora had to go to "Clanranald's house", says Chambers – *Ormaicleit*, says Mackenzie. Actually it was at Nunton, across the ford. The Prince and O'Neill went back to "the mountains of Coradale", says Chambers, quoting O'Neill, and Mackenzie translates this into *monadh Choradail*. But that was O'Neill's word for the South Uist hills in general. We know from other sources that on the 23rd MacEachen brought them by boat to Wiay (to avoid the ford, which was guarded) and on the 24th to Rossinish in Benbecula. The militia were closing in, and we know that the Prince and MacEachen spent the 25th in the open air in pouring rain, sheltered only by a rock. Chambers calls MacEachen "a sort of preceptor in the Clanranald family"; Mackenzie makes this *comhdalta do sheana Mhac-'Ic-Ailein* ("old Clanranald's foster-brother"), which sounds right.

It was at Rossinish that Flora and Lady Clanranald found the Prince on the 27th. "On entering the hut, they found his royal highness engaged in roasting the heart and liver of a sheep upon a wooden spit; a sight at which some of the party could not help shedding tears. Charles . . . observed, that it would be well, perhaps, for all kings if they had to come through such a fiery ordeal as he was now enduring." In translating, Mackenzie has him *a' ròstadh cridhe agus grùdhan caorach air dealg seilich*. How did he know the spit was of willow?

The day of departure was Saturday 28 June. *Di-dòmhnach an t-ochdamh latha fichead de mhìos meadhonach an t-Shàmhraidh*, says Mackenzie, getting the day wrong but the date right. The boat was ready. Before they set out for the beach Charles changed into “a flowered linen gown, a light-coloured quilted petticoat, a white apron, and a mantle of dun camlet made after the Irish fashion with a hood”. John Mackenzie is no fashion writer, but does his best: *gùn do dh’anard soilleir cota-bàn cùbhrainn, criosan geal air a bhial-thaobh, agus cleòca de chamaileid lachduinn air uachdar, air a dheanamh anns an fhasan Eireannach le cinneabharr do’n cheann*. For “apron” he uses *criosan*, which is really a belt – if you look at Dwelly’s drawing of an *earasaid* and Martin Martin’s description of it, you’ll find it was held around the waist by an ornamental *crios* or *criosan*.

We’ve reached the end of Chambers’s chapter 27, Mackenzie’s chapter 28. The militia are closing in so fast that Charles and Flora’s departure from Loch Uisgebhagh at 8 p.m., with MacEachen at the tiller, is best likened to the Americans’ flight from Saigon. Earlier that day they caught sight of “four wherries full of armed men apparently making towards the shore” – *ceithir bàtaichean Fìneach* (Loch Fyne boats), *làn de dhaoine fo àrmachd, a’ deanamh do réir coltais air tìr* – and they had quickly put out the fire and hidden themselves in the heather.

Throughout his wanderings the Prince “made the most surprising escapes from his enemies” (Chambers), *chaol-thearainn am Prionnsa féin bho phainntrich a nàmhaid* (Mackenzie). *Painntreach* seems to mean a snare. “Most of those who aided him,” adds Chambers, “fell almost immediately after into the hands of those who had been in search of him.”

Too true. Lady Clanranald and her husband are promptly arrested. O’Sullivan gets away in a French ship that comes looking for Charles in Benbecula, two days late. O’Neill is arrested in Benbecula and Donald MacLeod in Skye. Edward Burke (he was a South Uist man I believe, there were Burkes in Uist in those days) is luckier. Chambers: “He obtained concealment in a lonely part of the isle of Harris till after the act of indemnity passed in 1747, when, being safe, he returned to Edinburgh, purchased (probably by Jacobite contributions) a sedan chair, and contentedly spent the remainder of his days in his original occupation.”

Mackenzie: “He took shelter in a little cave (*ann an uamhaig*) in a lonely part of Harris, living as best he could on fish and venison (*air iasg a’s sithinn*) . . . He spent the end of his days . . . happily and gratefully drinking beer and telling his story (*’g òl leanna agus ag aithris a sgeòil*).”

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