

Charlie's Year (30): Betty and Flora

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I focused on the meeting of Prince Charles and Flora MacDonald in a shieling bothy near Kildonan in South Uist on 21 June 1746. When John Mackenzie describes this in his “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” of 1844, he shows the Prince lying down in a clump of rushes behind the bothy, then, once inside, sitting amongst the shieling girls eating crowdie and cream out of a “Norse dish” (*mìos Lochluinneach*).

The question is, where's it coming from? Basically Mackenzie's book is a translation of Robert Chambers's “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” of 1840. But he had a second source, Chambers's “Jacobite Memoirs” of 1834. At last I've been able to see a copy. It contains first-hand accounts of the '45 collected in 1747 by Robert Forbes. In some cases, like Felix O'Neil (sorry, I called him John last time), they were written down and sent or given to him, in others (like Ned Burke, Donald MacLeod, Flora MacDonald) Forbes took them down from the horse's mouth. Everything in “Jacobite Memoirs” and a lot more besides (with the exception of Lord George Murray's “Marches of the Highland Army”) was subsequently published in “The Lyon in Mourning”, which is easier to get hold of.

I can now say categorically that those two scenes are not in “Jacobite Memoirs”. And when you think of it, the number of potential eye-witnesses is not large. The source could only have been O'Neil or Flora (who don't mention it), Neil MacEachen, the Prince (who left no memoirs), or one of the girls. I see from the late Dr Alasdair Maclean's book “A MacDonald for the Prince” that MacEachen left an account which was published in “The New Monthly Magazine” in 1840. But as far as I can make out from Dr Maclean's book, MacEachen didn't mention these things either.

So Mackenzie either produced the scenes from his imagination, or he had some other source, oral or written. If from his imagination, we can say that he had an Ian Fleming-style instinct for little touches of circumstantial detail. If he had some other source, it was wildly at variance with Dr Maclean's account, which is based on MacEachen's and Uist tradition. MacEachen wrote that the idea of sending the Prince to Skye dressed as a woman called Betty Burke came from Flora's stepfather, Hugh MacDonald of Armadale, who was commander of a party of militia stationed in Benbecula, but was playing a double game. He proposed: “To send his stepdaughter, Miss Florence MacDonald, to Sleet, to live with her mother till the enemy was out of west (Uist). The Prince at the same time was ordered to dress in woman's close, that he might pass for her servant maid, and Neil was appointed to take care of both.”

The plan, says Dr Maclean, was discussed by Neil MacEachen, O'Neil and the Prince in a cave behind Beinn Ruigh Choinnich on 21 June. The Prince liked it, and Neil knew that Flora was at her brother's shieling at Unasary, so the Prince asked to see her. “Late as it was,” says Dr Maclean, “Neil went to the little house to waken her, and she had scarcely dressed when the Prince appeared at the door. She made them welcome and then the Prince told her, apparently for the first time, of the scheme.”

No trace here of rushes, Norse dishes, dairymaids, crowdie and cream.

This is just an example. I've gone into it in detail because I want to understand what is the dynamic of the only full-length account of the '45 written entirely in Gaelic. The dynamic seems to be this: about seven eighths of it is a condensed translation of “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6”, drawing mightily on Gaelic prose and verse literature for its imagery, and containing numerous mistakes, misunderstandings and exaggerations. One eighth consists of an extra dash of genuine oral tradition, other published sources, and Mackenzie's own imagination. There are a lot of different fibres there, and, for the sake of literature, history and translation studies, they're all well worth teasing out.

So here's a question: when somebody lands the contract to translate Harry Potter into Gaelic, will it allow that kind of latitude? I hope so. Because if it doesn't, what's the point?

One other thing before we follow Betty and Flora to Skye. Last time I said that Ned Burke, who had guided the Prince and cooked for him since Culloden, was a South Uist man. I was wrong. Forbes, as puzzled as I have been about this, consulted Donald MacLeod (Galtrigil) and Malcolm MacLeod (Raasay). “I asked if Bourk was not an Irish name, and where Ned was born. Both Donald and Malcolm joined in saying that Bourk indeed was

originally an Irish name, but that there had been some of that name for three or four generations past in and about the Isle of Skye, where, or rather in North Uist, Ned was born.”

Also contrary to what I said last time (based on Chambers and Mackenzie), when the Prince left for Skye Ned took to a cave in the hills of North Uist, not of Harris. This is in “The Lyon in Mourning”. Ned had two brothers, Oliver and Jacob. Oliver is a traditional name amongst the Burkes of Connacht. Jacob helped him, but Oliver refused, being “frightened out of his wits”. Once at Cladach Carinish Ned was buying a pair of shoes when the whole township was suddenly flooded with troops. “Spying an old black coat and a pair of old breeches in the house, he put them on, hiding his own cloaths under a chest, and went out at the door unconcerned. He stood a while among the men and conversed easily with them, then slipping by degrees out amongst them, he got to the hills to his old cave. Jacob Burk and the shoemaker’s wife got his cloaths (a highland dress) and brought them to him.”

I notice that, discussing North Uist names in volume 52 of the “Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness”, William Matheson says: “There are names that have disappeared, some in comparatively recent times. MacGlashans, Lamonts, Mackiegans, Macintyres, MacDiarmids, MacSweens, Monks, Burkes – do any of them still survive?”

Curiously, the Burke best remembered in history is the one that never existed. The alias “Betty Burke” will have been picked so that the Prince could pretend to be Ned’s Irish cousin. Ned was proud of this, but when back in Edinburgh working as a chairman, that is, carrying a sedan chair (a trade monopolised by Highlanders then and for long afterwards), he said: “If the Prince do not come and see me soon, good faith, I will go and see my daughter (Bettie Burk) and crave her. For she has not yet paid her christening money, and as little has she paid the coat I gae her in her greatest need.”

The storm-tossed crossing from Benbecula to Skye took place on the night of 28–29 June 1746. Betty and Flora saw the mountains through the morning mist, and the helmsman, says Mackenzie, ordered *a bréid a thoirt suas gu ard nan ullag* – “her sail to be hoisted as far as the pulleys would allow”, which isn’t in Chambers.

Approaching Waternish, they saw a party of militia on shore with a boat. It was a *sia-ramhach*, Mackenzie tells us, a six-oared vessel – but there were no oars. The soldiers called to them to land, so they pulled hard to escape. The soldiers fired. Charles told Flora to lie down at the bottom of the boat. She refused, unless he would do the same. “It was not till after some altercation,” says Chambers, “that they agreed to ensconce themselves together in the bottom of the boat.”

There’s nothing quite so undignified in the Gaelic version. Flora lies down, says Mackenzie, and implores Charles to do the same, instead of which he says: *O cha’n eagal domhsa! cha’n eil a chuspaireachd ro mhath!* (“Oh there’s no fear for me! The shooting’s no good!”) Then to the crew: *Fhearabh mo chridhe, suas leatha; ’s na tugaibh feairt air na daoidhearan, bheir dusan àlach eile, sibh glan às gach cunnard.* (“My darling lads, up with her; and don’t mind the villains, another dozen strokes will take you clean out of danger.”)

Dr John MacInnes has pointed out that traditional Gaelic verse portrays the hero as “a warrior in charge of a ship rather than as a seaman himself”. We couldn’t have a better example than this. In English Charles is lying with Flora in the bottom of the boat. In Gaelic he’s up there exhorting the oarsmen, in fact Mackenzie tells us the oarsmen obey his commands, giving “*hùgan air cuan nuallach, gàireach,*” till they land at the *Camus Mòr* in Kilmuir. It’s a quote from mac Mhgr Alastair’s ‘Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill’:

*Hùgan le cuan, nuallan gàireach,
Héig air chnagaibh,
Faram le bras-ghaoir na bàirlinn
Ris na maidibh.*

(“Whooch, says the ocean, a laughing roar, / Wheech upon tholepins, / Crash goes the loud roar of the wave / Against the timbers.”) Chambers tells us that by the time they land Flora is fast asleep with exhaustion at Charles’s feet. A nice touch, but Mackenzie doesn’t bother with it.

Flora’s finest moment is yet to come. Leaving Charles on the shore, sitting soaking wet on her trunk in his women’s clothes, she and Neil MacEachen go straight to Monkstat, the house of Sir Alexander MacDonald and his wife Lady Margaret. Sir Alexander is in Fort

Augustus with Cumberland, but his wife is a Jacobite sympathiser, and so is his factor, Alexander MacDonald of Kingsburgh. Unfortunately they are entertaining a guest, a Lieutenant MacLeod of the militia, who quizzes Flora about her boat and the reason for her journey. She replies so coolly that, contrary to his usual practice, MacLeod doesn't order her boat to be searched, nor does he ask to see Betty.

When, finally, Lady Margaret is told that the Prince has arrived, she nearly screams, exclaiming aloud "that she and her family were undone" (Chambers), *gun robh i-féin agus a teaghlach shios deth* (Mackenzie). Kingsburgh decides to take a stroll down to the shore, and Lady Margaret supplies him with "a bottle of wine, a tumbler, and some biscuits" (Chambers), or as Mackenzie says, *shearrag fhiona agus còrn, maille ri leth-dusan bhriosgaidean finealt, agus cnuac de chàise ghobhar, a bh'air a mheas san àm sin na làn-beoil cho tarbhach agus cho falain sa chaidh riabh am beul duine* – "a flask of wine and a horn, along with half a dozen excellent biscuits, and a lump of goat's cheese, reckoned at that time to be as nutritious and healthy a mouthful as ever went into a man's mouth". As far as I can make out, Flora's and MacEachen's accounts only mention wine and biscuits, so why should Mackenzie make up a thing like that? He must have got it from somewhere.

When Kingsburgh finds the Prince – not without some difficulty, as he has moved along the shore – Chambers tells us that he spreads the wine, tumbler and biscuits on a rock; Mackenzie is careful to add the cheese. The Prince "drank familiarly to his future conductor", says Chambers, and Mackenzie responds with a line of verse: *dh-òl Tearlach air a shlàinte a' cheart cho sùgach, àbhachdach, is "ged nach b'fhiamh an tòir."* Charles drank his health as merrily and cheerfully as if "the pursuit were not fierce". Mackenzie, loyal *Rosach* that he is, is quoting from an old Ross-shire song, Murdo MacKenzie of Achilty's 'An Làir Dhonn' ('The Brown Mare'), where Murdo compares the beloved boat in which he sails from Lewis to Poolewe with a shambling old nag that brings him the rest of the way home to Easter Ross:

*Nan éigheadh i sgìths
Se b'fheudar dhol sìos
'S a tréigsinn ge b' fhiamh an tòir.*

("If she cried out with exhaustion / You had to dismount / And forsake her though fierce the pursuit.")

Kingsburgh decides to bring "Betty" home with him that night. Arrangements are already afoot to spirit her off to Raasay. Of all Charlie's Year, it's on the journey from Kilmuir to Portree that tragedy will come nearest to comedy, and history to folklore.

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