

Charlie's Year (31): Carmichael's cloth

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IT'S the afternoon of Sunday 29 June 1746. The 57-year-old Alexander MacDonald of Kingsburgh, factor for the Trotternish estate, has been alerted by Flora MacDonald that Prince Charles has come across from Benbecula dressed as her maid, "Betty Burke". He finds him on the shore, and the pair set off on foot for the south.

They're spotted near the road by Flora herself, who is travelling south on horseback with Neil MacEachen, Mrs MacDonald of Kirkibost (who is in on the plot) and the latter's two servants, one male and one female (who are not). Mrs MacDonald's girl can't help remarking on the extraordinary sight. According to Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" of 1840, she exclaims that she has never seen such a tall impudent-looking woman in her life. "See what long strides the jade takes! I dare say she's an Irish woman, or else a man in woman's clothes."

In his "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844, John Mackenzie translates this directly. *Cha'n fhaca mi riabh cho ladorn amharc ris a' bhoireannach àrd ud, faicibh na gàmagan fada tha bhunngaid a' gearradh! cha chreid mi nach ban-Eireannach i, oir neo fireannach ann an aodach mnà.* In Wester Ross *bungaid* is a headstrong girl.

Flora "confirmed her in the former supposition", or as Mackenzie says more simply, *Thuir Fionnaghal, gu'm b'e a ciad bhairil a bha ceart.* Fortunately, she and MacEachen are soon able to part company from the other three and join Charles and Kingsburgh, but the next problem – somewhere about Uig, I suppose – is the people coming home from church at Snizort. They all express wonder at Betty's "uncommon height and awkwardness" (*airdead agus slaodaichead*), and many of them fasten themselves to Kingsburgh. They're delighted, Chambers points out, at the unexpected opportunity to have a word with their landlord's factotum; Mackenzie forgets to explain this, but doesn't omit the words with which Kingsburgh rounds upon them: *O chuideachda dhiamhainn, agus aindiadhaidh, nach sguir sibh a' labhairt mu n-'ur gnothaichean saoghalta' air an Dòmhnach!* Chambers: "Oh, sirs! cannot you let alone talking of your worldly affairs on Sabbath, and have patience till another day."

That does the trick – "they took the pious hint," says Chambers, "and moved off" – but the next problem is caused by Charles himself. They have some pretty deep rivers to cross, the infamous Rha and Conon at Uig for a start. "Charles held up his petticoats indelicately high," says Chambers, "to save them from being wet." Mackenzie has a much longer version, which I give in translation: "Charles raised his coat to the middle of his thighs (*gu meadhon a shléisnean*); at that very moment a party of MacLeods (*pàirtidh Leòdach*) were going past in search of him, and one of them recognised the Prince, because he had seen him before. What he did however was not give him up to his enemies but try to make him less recognisable than before (*feuchainn ri chur ni bu mò às aithne na bha e*) by shouting at the top of his voice: *Ud! ud! a Mhòrag nigh'n Fhearachair leag do chòta; is tu a dh' fhàs mi-bhanail o'n uiridh!* 'Come now, Morag daughter of Fearchar, let down your coat. How unwomanly you've become since last year!'

"The Prince asked the tacksman of Kingsburgh (*fear Chise-Bòrgh*) what the fellow (*balach*) was saying. When he was told, he nearly split his sides (*theab e grad sgàineadh*) laughing. Kingsburgh said he had better take the lad's advice when fording the next burn."

Chambers and Mackenzie are back in line now. In crossing the next stream (the Conon?) Charles "permitted his skirts to hang down and float upon the water" – *leag Tearlach le iomal a ghùin tuitean sìos 'sa'n t-sruth*, says Mackenzie, who doesn't make a lot more of the issue, but Chambers does, because he has a good joke coming up. Kingsburgh points out that this mode is as likely as the other to attract attention, which elicits another gale of laughter from Charles. Kingsburgh further points out that when greeted by the country people Charles has been bowing instead of curtseying, "and also that, in some other gestures and attitudes of person, he completely forgot the woman, and resumed the man. Your enemies," remarked Kingsburgh, "call you a pretender; but, if you be, I can tell you, you are the worst at your trade I ever saw."

“Why,” replied Charles, laughing, “I believe my enemies do me as much injustice in this as in some other and more important particulars. I have all my life despised assumed characters, and am perhaps the worst dissimulator in the world.”

There’s also an unexpurgated version of this story. It’s in a fascinating little book called “Alexis; or, The Young Adventurer, a Novel”, an account of the Prince’s island wanderings which appears to have been rushed into print in London in September 1746. My understanding is that it was based on information from Kingsburgh smuggled out of Edinburgh Castle (where he was held under close arrest) in August, then written up by Bishop Robert Forbes, Episcopal minister of Leith, and sent to London for printing. According to this version, Kingsburgh says: “All your Airs are so much upon the Masculine, that your Dress will only serve to discover you. When you should drop a Courtesy, you make a Bow. When your Garter is loose, you rudely pull up the Petticoats, and such is your Method too when you are to — —.”

They reach Kingsburgh on Loch Snizort at 11 p.m. When the factor reveals to his wife the identity of his strange-looking guest she exclaims (Chambers): “The Prince! then we’ll be all hanged!” Mackenzie: “*Am Prionns’*,” *ars ise* “*Mas e théid n-ar crochadh gu léir cho ard sa’ chuireas fiodh sinn!* In Mackenzie’s text everyone speaks Ross-shire Gaelic.

His wife’s next cause for panic is what to feed him. “Eggs, butter, cheese, and whatever else you can quickly make ready,” her husband suggests (Chambers). *Aran a’s ìm a’s càis, uidhean a’s baine*, says Mackenzie, adding bread and milk.

“Eggs, butter, and cheese!” repeats Mrs Macdonald (Chambers). “What a supper is that for a prince – he’ll never look at it.” “*Uibhean a’s baine*,” *arsa bean an taighe* (Mackenzie), “*be sin an t-suipeir gu dearbha, g’a cur fa-chomhair Prionnsa.*”

Kingsburgh points out that it’s a lot better than the Prince’s recent diet, and anyway, a formal supper would make the servants suspect something. Charles has the time of his life, Kingsburgh’s wife sitting on one side of him and Flora on the other. When the ladies have retired he “took out a little black stunted tobacco-pipe” (*thug e pìob dhubh stobach thombac air lòm*). He lights up, explaining, says Chambers, that he took up smoking on account of a toothache – *gu’n tharuinn am fuachd do’n robh e buailteach rè alabhain sgèth an déideadh na aoradh, agus gu’n robh ceò na pìoba toirt faothachadh dha air uairean* (“that the cold to which he was subjected during his exhausting wanderings gave him toothache, and that the pipe-smoke sometimes brought him relief”).

The pipe is so short by now that he calls it *a’ chutag*. The cutty.

Kingsburgh produces a small china punch-bowl and makes a toddy. They empty it several times, and there ensues a scene which Mackenzie tastefully omits from his translation. Kingsburgh tries to get his guest to go to bed but Charles wants still more toddy and “a struggle ensued in which the little vessel broke into two pieces, Charles retaining one in his hands, and Kingsburgh holding the other”.

So Charles goes to bed. He hasn’t slept in a proper bed since he was in Lewis in May. Kingsburgh wakes him at 1 p.m. *Thuirtear Tearlach ris*, says Mackenzie, *nach robh cuimhne aige gu’n do chaidil e cho trom no cho fad’ le rugadh e*. “Charles told him he couldn’t remember sleeping so long or so soundly since he was born.” That *le* is pure Gairloch.

Kingsburgh decides that, for safety, Charles must leave in the clothes he arrived in, then turn back into a man later on. More fun ensues in Chambers, which Mackenzie omits. “When Charles was to dress, Mrs Macdonald caused her daughter to act as his hand-maid, for, as she afterwards told Bishop Forbes, ‘the deil a preen he could put in.’ While Miss Macdonald was dressing him, he was like to fall over with laughing. After the pinnets, gown, hood, and mantle were put on, he said, ‘Oh, Miss, you have forgot my apron. Where is my apron? Get me my apron here, for it is a principal part of my dress.’”

Charles sets off for Portree with Flora and Kingsburgh, who has “a suit of male Highland attire” under his arm. When out of sight of the house Flora goes on ahead with a *pàisd nighin*, (girl child), says Mackenzie, while Kingsburgh brings Charles into a wood and helps him change. Chambers: “The suit which he now put on, consisted, as usual, of a short coat and waistcoat, a philabeg and short hose, a plaid, a wig, and a bonnet.” Mackenzie: *feile-beag, siste-cot, cota-gearr, osanan cataidh agus bonaid togalach*. So in Gaelic we don’t get the plaid and wig, the hose are of *cadadh* (coarse wool), and the bonnet is *togalach* – “jaunty”?

The Prince says farewell to Kingsburgh and walks off into the rain with Neil MacEachen and a little herd-boy (*buachaile bhò*) as their guide. Kingsburgh hides Betty Burke's cast-off garments under a bush. They lie there for some time, then, for fear of the military, he brings them home and burns the lot – everything except the gown. “The preservation of the gown,” says Chambers, “was owing to his daughter, who insisted upon keeping it as a relic of their Prince, and because it was a pretty pattern. A Jacobite manufacturer of the name of Carmichael, at Leith, afterwards got a pattern made from it, and sold an immense quantity of cloth, precisely similar in appearance, to the ‘loyal’ ladies of Scotland.”

This is the origin of Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair's “Clò Mhic 'ille Mhìcheil” – “Carmichael's Cloth”, one of many propaganda songs which he made in the next year or two in a desperate attempt to encourage another rising. It's in volume 3 of J. L. Campbell's “Hebridean Folksongs”.

*Hùg air clò Mhic 'ille Mhìcheil,
Ó hùgaibh, hùg a rì hug,
Hùg air clò Mhic 'ille Mhìcheil.*

“I hate it that you lack clothing,” the poet tells Charles (*Is oil liom eudach a bhith dhìth ort*). “Europe has put cloth in the loom for you, and until it comes out, there will be no peace. But it will be woyen, shaped and waulked before the harvest of Michaelmas comes (*Mus dig buain na h-Éill Mhìcheil*). Scotland will help the waulking if there are maidens (*gruagaichean*) in the kingdom. Your red cloth will be waulked with gore, blood and urine (*gaoir, fuil is fual*) besmearing it.”

Urine was the ammoniac used in waulking to bring up a nap on the cloth. Alastair now develops his metaphor at length by saying how “girls” will come from every kindred and district (which he names, each in its own verse) to waulk Carmichael's cloth, then:

*Cuireamaid 'na éideadh Teàrlach,
Stracamaid an àird ar dìcheall.*

*Na b' ionann seo 's an luadhadh dosgach
A bha 'n Cùil Lodair nuair a phill sinn!*

*Luaidhibh e ged nì sibh tuiteam,
A ghruagaichean cruiteal rìoghail . . .*

“Let's dress Charlie in his raiment, let us ratchet up our efforts. Let's not repeat the tragic waulking we had at Culloden when we retreated. Waulk it even if you fall, you lively royalist maidens . . . Keenly waulk the cloth by hand and draw blood from the son of the whore. A thousand curses on the brutes who didn't waulk for you on time, so that you could now be wearing it as an honoured royal vestment.”

17 September 2004