

Charlie's Year (32): Doing the dishes

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THIS article is a tale of three vessels – five, if you include the boats. Remember the little china punch-bowl that Prince Charles and MacDonald of Kingsburgh fought over, because Kingsburgh wanted his guest to go to bed but Charles wanted him to fill it up again? It broke in two, and each of them was left holding half of it.

Well, **WHFP** reader Chrissie Dick of North Uist and Balmaha tells me that she and her husband Dr John Bannerman are the proud possessors of it now, having inherited it from a relative in Skye. The only trouble is, before passing it on, the lawyer who handled the estate set to with Evostick, and lo and behold! History's little accident was patched up in no time.

Next, you may recall that I made a fuss over John Mackenzie's description in his "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" (1844) of Charles sitting down amongst the shieling girls in a bothy at Kildonan in South Uist, supping crowdie and cream out of a *mìos Lochluinneach* or "Norse dish" – *ni a thaitin ris, thasa gràdh, n'a b'fhearr no aon bhiadh air na bhlaiss e riabh*. "Which he enjoyed, they say, more than any food he had ever tasted."

Mackenzie makes it sound authentic, and no doubt it is, though whether it happened on the night Charles met Flora MacDonald is another matter. Anyway, I said I didn't know what a "Norse dish" was. Cue **WHFP** reader Dr Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart of Back and Edinburgh who politely tells me to get my Dwelly boots on. Sure enough, under *clàr-Lochluinneach* the Greatest Englishman Who Ever Lived explains it as a plank hollowed out in the centre in the form of a trough. "Small shallow holes were cut at intervals in the top edges which were for holding salt. The meal of potatoes was poured into the hollow in the centre, round which the family sat at dinner."

Dr Stiùbhart adds: *Bha na Leodhasaich fhathast ag ithe asda 'nuair a bha mo sheanmhair (1898-2001) òg. Ar leam nach robh MacCoinnich a' tarraing air beul-aithris idir leis a' phàirt ud de'n sgeul – dìreach gu robh fhios aige gu robh an leithid de thruinnsear aig na daoine a bha a' fuireachd anns na h-Eileanan Siar, agus gum biodh e nàdarra a-réisde gum faigheadh am Prionnsa a dhiathad ann! Nàdar de dhibhearsain, 's dòcha, dha'n luchd-leughaidh a bha a' fuireachd air Tir-Mór.* "The Lewis folk were still eating out of them when my grandmother (1898–2001) was young. I don't think Mackenzie was drawing on oral tradition at all with that part of the story – just that he knew that people in the Western Isles had that kind of dish, so it would be natural for the Prince to get his dinner in one! A sort of joke, perhaps, for mainland readers."

Well, maybe. I've begun to notice how Mackenzie uses *clàr*. He distinguishes it clearly from *bòrd* ("board, table") on the one hand and *truinnsear* ("trencher, plate") on the other. Look at this description of what happens in Captain John Mackinnon's house in Elgol on 4 July 1746. By now Charles is letting on that he is the manservant of his companion, Malcolm MacLeod; Mrs Mackinnon is Malcolm's sister. *Chuir i sìos biadh do na falbhanaich, ach rinn Tearlach shuidhe gu diùid greis air falbh bho 'n bhord, ag ithe dheth na bhiadh bu shuaraich' a bh'air a chlàr.*

Air faicinn sin do Chalum dh'iarr e air gun a bhi cho saidealta, e theannadh a staigh ris a bhòrd agus a bhiadh a gabhail gu sgairteal. Thuir am Prionnsa gu'm b'aithne dha oilean n'a b' fhearr na toiseachadh comh-ith ri mhaighistear, ach le mòran faraich shuidh Tearlach dlù do'n chlàr. ("She put down food for the wanderers, but Charles sat diffidently a short distance from the *bòrd*, partaking of the most inferior food on the *clàr*. When Malcolm saw that, he asked him not to be so bashful, but to draw in to the *bòrd* and eat heartily. The Prince said he had better manners than to join in a meal with his master, but after much persuasion Charles sat in close to the *clàr*.")

Our third vessel is another wooden one, and we'll come to it in a minute, for we must get on with our story. We parted from the Prince on 30 June 1746 as he said farewell to Kingsburgh and walked off into the rain with Neil MacEachen. Flora had gone on ahead with a *pàisd nighin*, a girl child, says Mackenzie. She reached the inn at Portree an hour before Charles and Neil, who arrived at dusk to find her *ga tiormachadh féin ris an teine, oir fhuair i fras throm uisg' air a turas* – drying herself by the fire, for she had encountered a heavy shower of rain on her journey.

Charles now met the men who had organised his flight to Raasay – Donald Roy MacDonald, lamed at Culloden, brother of MacDonald of Baleshare, and the aforementioned Malcolm MacLeod, another Culloden veteran, cousin of the laird of Raasay, who fought for the Prince.

It was the only inn Charles ever ventured into on his wanderings, and the account in Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" (1840) is circumstantial. "The company joined in urging him to shift and put on a dry shirt, Donald Roy offering him his philabeg. He at first refused, from delicacy towards Miss Macdonald; but he was at length prevailed on to disregard ceremony. When he had put on the fresh shirt, some food was brought in, and he fell to it as he was, his long walk having furnished him with a ravenous appetite.

"Donald Roy, notwithstanding the anxiety of the moment, fell a-laughing at the strange figure he now cut; when, seeing the Prince looking at him, he said, 'Sir, I believe that is the English fashion.' 'What fashion do you mean?' 'Why, they say the English, when they intend to eat very heartily, cast off their clothes.' 'They are right,' said Charles, 'lest any thing should incommode their hands when they are at work.'"

The landlord, a man called MacNab, was suspicious, and this is where our third vessel makes its appearance. "He now asked for a drink, but, there being no fermented liquor in Skye, except in gentlemen's houses, he was obliged to slake his thirst with water from a dirty-looking wooden and rough-edged vessel, which the landlord employed to bale his boat."

Chambers is here using "water" in its genteel old-fashioned sense of "whisky" (*uisge*). This becomes clear later when the bill is presented and Chambers tell us that the company "had drunk a whole bottle of whisky". Mackenzie wasn't fooled – *ghabh am Prionnsa biadh a's drama*, he says. But to return to our vessel. "Donald Roy took a draught from this unpleasant cup, and handed it to the Prince, with a whispered assurance that it was tolerably clean, and that prudence required him to drink from it without hesitation, lest he should raise suspicions among the people of the house. Charles then put it to his lips, and took a hearty draught, after which he put on his philabeg and other clothes."

As I've said before, there's an uncanny sense of Charles fulfilling a destiny for which Gaelic literature had prepared him. The great song "MacGregor of Roro", already a hundred years old by then, warns the persecuted chief:

*Nuair a théid thu 'n taigh òsta
Na h-òl ann ach aoindeoch.*

*Gabh do dhrama 'nad sheasamh
'S bi freastlach mu d' dhaoinibh.*

*Na dèan diùthadh mu d' shaitheach –
Gabh an ladar, no 'n taoman.*

("When you go to the inn / Have only one drink there. / Take your dram standing up / And look after your men. / Don't fuss over your vessel – / Take the ladle, or the baler.")

They made sure to get their change in full, as ordinary travellers would. Charles got himself a carry-out: a bottle of whisky, a bottle of brandy, a cold fowl in a napkin. Then he said farewell to Flora and MacEachen.

When Dòmhnall Ruadh went back to the inn after seeing Charles down to the boat, MacNab was inquisitive. Dòmhnall Ruadh confessed that the stranger was "a brother rebel, a Sir John MacDonald, an Irishman". MacNab replied that he had a strong notion that the gentleman was the Prince in disguise, "for he had something about him that looked very noble".

Charles spent two days in Raasay, at Glam. Chambers tells us quite a lot about it, but Mackenzie cuts it down to a single paragraph, which is strange, because there were many ties between the island and his native Gairloch. There is a particularly good story about a mysterious stranger who had come to the island about a fortnight before to sell a roll of tobacco. The tobacco was long since sold, but he was still wandering about.

Now he was seen approaching the bothy at Glam. Those inside held a council of war, and it was decided to shoot him. Charles was horrified. “In the midst of the debate,” says Chambers, “John Mackenzie, the watchman, who sat at the door of the hut, said in Erse, ‘He must be shot: you are the king, but we are the parliament, and will do what we choose.’”

When this was translated for Charles he couldn’t help laughing. In all innocence, this man had put his finger on the political problem that had dogged his family for a hundred years and sent his great-grandfather, Charles I, to the scaffold.

The man walked on by, but Charles was nervous, and asked to be brought back to Skye. As Malcolm MacLeod later expressed it, on being asked his opinion of the Prince: “He was the most cautious man I ever saw, not to be a coward; and the bravest, not to be rash.”

They crossed back on the evening of Wednesday 2 July. The sea grew rough, and Charles used what Gaelic he had to sing “a lively Erse song”, as Chambers puts it. Mackenzie knows all about this: *Thoisich e air seinn ann an Gàèlig ghlain beagan rann a dh’ionnsaich e dheth an “Iorram Dharaich” bho Dhòmhnall Mac-Leòid a’ chiad fhear treòrachaidh.* “He started to sing in good Gaelic a few verses that he had learned of the ‘Iorram Dharaich’ from Donald MacLeod, his first guide.”

*M’ eudail a dh’fhearaibh nan àlach,
Nuair a dheigheadh tu gu d’ bhàta
Siud an obair nach biodh ceàrr dhut,
Bhiodh do ghillean anns an àlach,
Bhiodh tu fhéin air stiùir do bhàta,
Fear curantach treubhach làidir . . .*

“My darling of the oar-bank men, / When you’d go aboard your vessel / That was the perfect work for you, / Your lads would be in the oar-bank, / You yourself at the helm of your boat, / A heroic, valiant, powerful man . . .” Mackenzie doesn’t quote it, but he obviously knows it, for that word *àlach* is in his head. *Cha deach’ iad ach ma cheud àlach bho thìr, ’nuair a thog na tuinn robach an cinn gu gàireach, is bha ’ghailbheinn a bàrcadh orra.* “They had only gone about a hundred oar-banks from land when the rough waves raised their heads roaringly and the storm burst over them.”

They reached *Creag Mhór MhicNeacail* in Portree Bay about 11 p.m. Charles jumped into the sea in his greatcoat to help pull the boat ashore, and they spent the night and the following day in an empty byre belonging to Nicolson, none too clean. The following night, which was moonless but short, Charles and Malcolm walked 24 miles through the Cuillin to Captain John Mackinnon’s house in Elgol.

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