

Charlie's Year (33): My friends are my enemies

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ON THE night of 3 July 1746 Charles Edward Stuart and Malcolm MacLeod, Raasay's cousin, walked from Scorrybreck to Captain John Mackinnon's house in Elgol. Apparently, to avoid the garrison at Sligachan, they took the long eastern route by the head of lochs Sligachan and Ainort and the Srath Mór, not the short middle way "through the Cuillin" as I said last time.

Charles decided to pose as a manservant, and they exchanged clothes. He took off his wig and put it in his pocket, says Robert Chambers in his "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" (1840). Then he produced a dirty white napkin and asked Malcolm to tie it around his head, "bringing it down upon his eyes and nose" – *neapaig dhubh shioda air a suaineadh m'a cheann*, says Mackenzie in "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" (1844), *mar chite air duine tinn*. "A black silk napkin wound around his head, as would be seen on a sick man."

I wonder if it was the same napkin in which his carry-out of cold fowl had been wrapped in the inn at Portree three nights before? Anyway, Mackenzie appears to be telling us something here about Highland customs. And although the Prince was fit, passing for a sick man would have been easy as he was also "disguised" in a different way. "To put the matter into the most delicate form," says Chambers in a passage which Mackenzie omits from his translation, "the reader must be asked to imagine the worst feature of the squalor of a wayside beggar."

He had, after all, spent the previous night in Nicolson's byre.

Charles asked Malcolm how he looked. Malcolm told him he might still be recognised. "This is an odd remarkable face I have got," said Charles, "that nothing can disguise it."

It wasn't quite what Malcolm meant. He used to say afterwards it was to do with Charles's "air", which was "stately and grand". I think the difference between Prince Charles and a Highland chief was that Highland chiefs had to beware of banging their heads on the ceiling. When I was a lecturer in Edinburgh University I often travelled in lifts with students who had been at posh private schools. They had an amazing ability to talk right through you to an unseen friend on the other side – usually about skiing holidays. It used to remind me of a story about an American millionaire who would walk into a room, assume the seated position and allow his bottom to descend towards the floor, safe in the knowledge that a flunkey would reach it in time with a chair. Confidence, my boy.

The disguise was tested as soon as they got to Strath, because the MacKinnons had been "out" with Charles and knew him well. Two men whom they met "stared at the Prince for a little," says Chambers, "and soon recognising him, fairly lifted up their voices and wept". Mackenzie's "translation" again speaks of different customs. *Dh'aithnich na daoine e air ball, agus cha b'urrainn, iad am bròn a chumail orra féin n'a b'fhaide, ach, ghlaod iad a' bualadh nam bas*. "The men recognised him immediately, and could no longer restrain their grief, but cried out, clapping their hands."

In Gaelic society clapping was a sign of grief, and was done at funerals.

Captain Mackinnon, who was married to Malcolm's sister, was out when they arrived. Malcolm introduced Charles to his sister as his servant, Lewie Caw, son of a surgeon in Crieff, who had served in the Highland army and was known to be hiding somewhere in Skye. ("Surgeon" means also "barber" I suppose.) It was a good joke – the Prince's name was Charles Edward Louis Philip Casimir.

Following their meal, Chambers tells us, "after the mode of ancient Highland hospitality" a serving girl came with warm water to wash Malcolm's feet. I suppose it would have been normal to eat first and wash later, if the food was ready. Charles was already in need of a wash, as we have seen, in addition to which "he had fallen into a bog, and bemired himself up to the middle". When Malcolm's feet were done he asked the girl to do Lewie's. The girl let fly. Chambers: "No such thing! Although I wash the master's feet, I am not obliged to wash the servant's. What! he's but a low country woman's son. I will not wash his feet, indeed." Mackenzie: *Ma ta, cha ghlan mi gu dearbha; cha bu leamh* (that should read *leam* it seems) *ach sin, mac na cailliche Gallda, nigheadh e-féin a chasan*.

I like that last bit. "Let him wash his own feet."

This rebellion put Mrs Mackinnon's authority on the line, and she made the girl wash Lewie's feet. She washed them "so roughly" (*cho cruaidh an aghaidh an cuilg*, "so hard against their bristle") that Charles asked Malcolm to tell her to take it easy. He probably had blisters. Surprisingly, Charles only took two hours' sleep that night, and Malcolm came down to find him dandling and singing to Mrs MacKinnon's child. "Who knows but this little fellow may be a captain in my service yet?" he says cheerfully, by way of explanation.

"Or you rather an old sergeant in his company," mutters a cailleach in the corner.

The next meal they took was with Captain MacKinnon and the Chief of MacKinnon. For discretion it was laid out for them – cold meat and wine – in a cave on the shore, well known today as the Prince's Cave. It's a remarkable fact that while Charles kept going free, with one or two exceptions everyone who helped him was arrested and imprisoned soon afterwards. He noticed it himself, and it gave him much to think about.

On the night of 4 July the MacKinnons brought him over from Elgol to the mainland. They landed at Mallaigbeg and lay low on the shore of Loch Nevis for three days. Mallaig wasn't the bustling place it is today as there was no port and no railway.

The atmosphere on the mainland was different. Uist had been relatively safe, as the Uistmen, though Jacobite, had not risen for the Prince and were not being persecuted. Skye was more mixed, but was being policed by its own militias and raiding parties from the Navy. Here among the high mountains, however, lived the people who had formed the core of Charles's army, attempting to survive within reach of the garrison at Fort William, in constant fear of persecution and plunder by regular soldiery.

During the next few days Charles suffered the humiliation of being refused help by his own officers and friends. Let me recap. He avoided MacLeod of Raasay, who had fought for him and whose lands were devastated (as Charles saw for himself). The MacKinnon lands were also devastated, and he had not been keen to meet the MacKinnon chief again, but he was a diehard 65-year-old Jacobite of the old school who embraced him with open arms – he survived the prison ships, and the cave where he had dined with the Prince became his favourite spot in the remaining years of his life.

But look what happens now. They cross Loch Nevis to Scotus in Knoydart where Old Clanranald – he who helped Charles so much in Uist – has taken refuge (he was *'na thaigheadas samhraidh*, "in his summer household", says Mackenzie). Charles stays behind on a small island while Captain MacKinnon goes to see him. "He saw Clanranald walking by himself, who no sooner spied the approaching stranger than he hastened to get within doors. John overtook him, and seized him by the skirts just as he was entering the door."

MacKinnon tells him the Prince is nearby and wants to put himself in his care. Clanranald refuses, saying he knows no one who can take charge of the Prince. MacKinnon asks for advice. Bring him back to Raasay, put him on Rona, says Clanranald – "a small grass island evidently unfit to shelter the royal fugitive" (Chambers); *eilean beag anns bu ghann a gheibheadh e aon tràth bidh 'san àm sin* ("a small island in which he would hardly have got one square meal at that time", Mackenzie).

Charles takes this rebuff philosophically, and they head for MacDonald of Morar's house on Loch Morar. It has been burnt to the ground. Early next morning they find him with his family in a bothy. Morar was one of Charles's officers and promises to find him a secure hiding-place. His wife, a sister of Lochiel, bursts into tears when she sees the Prince. All she can give him to eat is cold salmon warmed up and no bread. Morar brings Charles and the MacKinnons to a cave, and while they sleep Morar sets out to look for his colonel, Young Clanranald, one of Charles's most senior officers.

When Morar comes back he is in a completely different mood. He has been unable to find Young Clanranald, he says. "Well, Morar," says Charles, "there is no help for that; you must do the best you can yourself." He answers that he can do nothing for him, nor does he know anyone to whom he can recommend him.

It's a complete breakdown of army and government discipline, rubbing the Prince's nose in the fact that he has now no army and no government. He tells Morar what he thinks of him, and so does Captain MacKinnon: "I am persuaded, Morar, though you deny it, you have met with your betters, and got bad counsel, otherwise you would not have changed your mind so much as you have done in so short a time."

Morar continues to deny that he has seen Young Clanranald, but stays firm in refusing all aid to the Prince. Charles explodes into irony: his friends have become his enemies, he says,

and his enemies his friends, and he points out that the kin of Sir Alexander MacDonald, who refused to join him, have been “most faithful to me in my distress, and contributed greatly to my preservation”. Remembering present company, he adds: “I hope, Mr Mackinnon, you will not desert me too.”

The old chief takes it personally, as well he might, but Charles says he meant the young Captain MacKinnon, who promises: “With the help of God I will go through the wide world with your royal highness.”

Mackenzie makes no mention of Young Clanranald, simply saying that Morar refused all further help. I have often wondered why it is that the poet Alastair mac Mhgr Alastair is said to have fallen out with Young Clanranald, whom he had served as a captain throughout the '45. I think this episode is the reason. Everything Alastair owned had been plundered or destroyed, right down to the family cat, which was not only killed but also disposed of, he claimed, lest it serve his wife and children for food. “Captain MacDonald and his wife and children wandered through hills and mountains till the act of indemnity appeared,” Bishop Forbes reported, “and in the time of their skulking from place to place his poor wife fell with child, which proved to be a daughter, and is still alive.”

For the ordinary people of the Clanranald Country things could hardly have been worse, but their leaders appeared to be trying to save their own skins. It was the middle ranks of the kindred who now saved the Prince – Alastair’s immediate kin, Angus MacDonald of Borrodale and his son John, Alexander MacDonald of Glenaladale and his brother John. This, I believe, is why Alastair’s highly symbolic poem ‘Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill’ shows the crew pulling at the oars and manning the sails while the chief, a shadowy figure, does nothing.

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