

Charlie's Year (34): Ring of fire

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IT'S 8 July 1746 and Prince Charles and his MacKinnon companions have arrived on the mainland at Loch Nevis. The MacKinnon chief goes looking for a cave while the rest row up the loch. As they round a point they strike their oars on a boat tied to the rock, and see five men on the shore with red crosses on their bonnets – militia. John Mackenzie, in his book “Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa” (1844), has the exact words spoken. *Cia às a thainig sibh, agus c'àite bheil sibh a' dol?* “Where have you come from, and where are you going?”

Thàinig á Sléibhte, agus tha sinn a' dol do'n choille air toir fiodh tarsuinn, no crannalach bàta. “From Sleat, and we're going to the woods to look for cross-timbers for boat-building.”

Thigibh gu tìr air ball air neo cha shaoghal duibh ach na th' eadar clach a's òrd. “Come ashore at once or you'll have no more life than there is between a stone and a hammer.”

They pull away hard, and *luchd nan croisean* leap into their boat to pursue them. Charles is sitting in the bottom between Captain John MacKinnon's knees, covered by the Captain's plaid, constantly demanding to know what is happening.

The muffled voice between the Captain's knees declares an urgent desire to jump ashore. The Captain forbids it, and instead orders the crew to have their muskets ready. They approach a place where the trees stretch down to the shore. *Aon uair is gu'm faigh sinn a steach a measg na coille,* says the Captain, *faodaidh na croisean dearga bhi gabhail mu'm buinn oir neo bheir sinne greadan orra bho chul nan craobh.* “Once we get in amongst the wood the red crosses can sheer off or else we'll give them a roasting from behind the trees.”

And so they escape.

As I showed last time, the atmosphere on the mainland at this time was so tense that the Clanranald family would have nothing more to do with the Prince. Just as in Uist and in Skye, however, as Robert Chambers puts it in his “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” of 1840, the Prince enjoyed a series of those “remarkable deliverances which induced so many of his adherents to believe that his life was under the immediate and constant care of Heaven”. There's no need to doubt the general truth of this; all that's uncertain is the detail, as we have noticed so often in comparing what these two books say, even though Mackenzie's was supposed to be a mere translation of Chambers's!

On 10 July the MacKinnons brings the Prince to Borrodale in Arisaig, the very house in which he lodged during the first few days after his arrival in Scotland almost exactly a year before. It has been burnt to the ground, and Angus MacDonald of Borrodale is living in a bothy nearby. Chambers tells how the Prince is reluctant at first to enter this bothy for fear of meeting his former hostess, knowing that one of her sons has not been heard of since Culloden. He needn't have worried. She will be glad to serve her Prince once again, she tells him, and as for her sons, they only did their duty.

The MacKinnons pass the Prince on to Angus MacDonald, who tucks him away for a few days in what is to be the first of several ingenious hiding-places – “in a cleft between two rocks”, says Chambers, “a hut had been artfully constructed, with the grassy side of the turf outwards, so that it exactly resembled a natural green bank”. Mackenzie translates faithfully: *Thogadh bothan fàil agus taobh an fheadir a mach, air chor is gu'n saoiladh duine nach faca bhi ga thogail, nach robh ann ach toman gòrm do dh'obair nàduir.*

On the 23rd, says Chambers (actually it was on the 18th), Borrodale brought bad news. The Redcoats knew that Charles was somewhere in the Rough Bounds, and they had cut off his escape by posting troops in a line from the head of Loch Hourn to the head of Loch Shiel. “The cordon,” says Chambers, “consisted of single sentinels, planted within sight of each other, who permitted no one to pass unchallenged. By night, large fires were lighted, between which the men continually passed to and fro, so as to leave no place for more than a few minutes at a time unvisited.”

Charles had to get out, fast, and he achieved this in the company of Alexander MacDonald of Glenaladale, his brother John, and Borrodale's youngest son, also John. At this point Mackenzie's condensed account becomes a breathtaking narrative punctuated chiefly by the names of the mountains upon which the little party snatch some sleep and by the little bits of food which come their way – salient details which are lost in Chambers's

more long-winded account. *Sgorra-beag am braidhe Arasaig. Mulach Fhriogh-Bheinn. Dòmhnall Cam-Shròn Ghlinne-Peighinn* – Donald Cameron of Glenpean, who becomes their guide. *Lipidh mine agus ma thuaram pund de dh-ìm, air son biadh dìreabh* – “a lippy (quarter peck) of oatmeal and about a pound of butter” which Glenpean happened to have with him as “wilderness food”.

Mulach beinne os-ceann Loch-Arcaig, ris an canair Màm-nan-Calum. Coire-nan-Gall, ma chrìochan chnòdeirt agus Loch-Arcaig. Ùlag á poca mine Dhòmhnall Cham-Shroin, ni leis an d'ith iad sgonn de'n ìm! “A handful from Donald Cameron’s meal-bag, with which they ate a lump of butter!”

Aodann cnuic aig ceann shuas Loch-an-aidh: here three of them rest while Glenpean and Glenaladale’s brother go to ransack a nearby *àiridh*. In normal times it’s the middle of the shieling season, but all they can find is *dà mhùlachag bheag chàise*, two small cheeses.

Beinn chas do'n ainm Druim-a-Chòis. Or so says Mackenzie, but he can’t be trusted on these names, it seems, for Chambers has it as “the steep hill called Drumachosi”, and this is in fact *Druim Chosaidh* between Loch Hourn and Loch Quoich. Here they come close to disaster. Chambers: “The night was very dark, the hill very steep, and the gentlemen went in a line, Donald Cameron first, the Prince next, after him Glenaladale, behind whom came the two John Macdonalds. In crossing a small rivulet which gushed out of the hill and glided over a precipice, Charles slipped a foot, and fell, and he would certainly have tumbled over the rock and been dashed to pieces below, if Cameron had not seized him by one arm, and Glenaladale by the other, and so recovered him.”

Mackenzie translates faithfully, but finishes: *Chaidh ac' air a thogail suas air a chas-cheum, ged theab iad a bhi 'nan triùir "sìos le bruthach gu'n dìreadh."* (“They managed to lift him up on to the path, though all three of them nearly went ‘downhill without climbing’.”) This is one of those quotations which so intrigue me. Could it be adapted from the old, old song about MacGregor of Roro

*D'am bu shuaicheantas giuthas
Ri bruthach ga dhìreadh*

(“Whose badge was the pine / When climbing a brae”)? Anyway the excitement mounts. According to Mackenzie, when they reach the top of the hill, they see the light of one of the enemy camps ahead, and realise that they are completely surrounded – *bha iad mar sin air an iathadh rompa 'nan deigh agus air gach taobh!* Chambers: “On reaching the top of the hill, they discerned the fires of a camp directly in their front, which they thought they could scarcely shun. Resolved, however, to make the attempt at all hazards, they approached the dreaded object till they could actually hear the soldiers talking to each other. Then creeping up the next hill, they spied the fires of another camp, which also seemed to lie directly in their path. Here they at last determined to make the attempt.”

According to Chambers (but not Mackenzie), Glenpean volunteers to go through the lines and come back in order to prove that it’s safe to do so. At this stage, as if there isn’t enough to cope with, we meet both folklore and humour, which to the Quern-Dust Calendar is an irresistible combination. “He began to complain that his nose was *itchy*, a clear sign, he averred, that they had great dangers to go through.”

Absolutely true. Look at almost any book about superstitions. Opie and Tatem’s “Dictionary of Superstitions” has wonderful entries grouped under “Elbow itches”, “Eye itches”, “Hand itches = money”, and “Nose itches”. I know that the itch of the lip that foretells a dram is *sgriob an drama*, and the itch of the palm that foretells money is *sgriob an airgid*; what Donald Cameron was experiencing must have been *sgriob a' chunnairt*. “Charles, notwithstanding his perilous circumstances,” says Chambers, “could not help laughing at this fantastic alarm.”

Off goes Cameron into the darkness, and eventually he comes back. “It was now two o’clock in the morning, and the brilliancy of the fires was beginning to fade before the advancing lights of day. Betwixt the two posts which they intended to cross, there was a small mountain stream, whose winter torrents had, in the course of ages, worn a deep channel among the rocks. Up this deep and narrow defile, at the moment when the sentinels were returning to the fires, and had their backs turned towards the place, the party crept upon all-fours, with the stealthy caution and quiet of a party of Indian savages. A few minutes

sufficed to carry them to a place where they were completely screened from the observation of the enemy.”

Mackenzie translates faithfully, except that he places the defile in a *sgàrnach* or scree slope, and calls the enemy *cìorcach* (*cìocrach* “voracious”). *A nise bha eadar dà chàmpa nan nàmhaid amar uillt a chladhaich tuil a’ gheamhraidh tro aodainn sgàrnaich (no mar their cuid sgàrdan) ach bha e nise tioram le tart an t-sàmhraidh, anns a’ chlais so shònraich na laoich chruadalach an ionnsaidh thoirt air teicheadh bho nàimhdean cìorcach, agus dhìrich iad suas air a màgan ann an leabaidh an uillt agus cha b’ fhada gus an robh iad á fradharc an eascaraid.*

They have run the ring of fire. In any good story it’s a fine moment for comic relief, and Chambers provides some from the Prince’s own account, as narrated by one of the MacPhersons who looked after him later in Cluny’s Cage. Charles enquires after the welfare of Glenpean’s nose. It’s still “a wee yeuky”, replies the gallant Glenpean; actually the words as reported by MacPherson are: “It is better now, but it still yuicks a little.”

“What, Donald?” cries the Prince. “Have we still more guards to pass?”

29 October 2004