

Charlie's Year (35): cruadal

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“THE Prince took a slice of the cheese and spread oatmeal on its surface – food, he reckoned, as agreeable (*taitneach*) as any fine wheaten bread that he had ever eaten covered in honey! After eating that morsel he had a drink out of the burn and lay down to rest on the green grass (*air an àilean ghòrm*) and went to sleep.”

This is Charles Edward Stuart on 21 July 1746, after stealing through the military cordon that stretched from Loch Hourn to Loch Sheil. I have translated the words from those of John Mackenzie in “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” (1844). The book is supposed to be a translation of Robert Chambers’s “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” of 1840. Chambers had actually written: “Cutting a slice of cheese, which he covered with oatmeal, and seasoning that dry fare with a drink from the neighbouring spring, he contentedly stretched the form upon the cold ground, whose home, in the words of the old song, ‘should have been a palace’.”

Note the little changes that Mackenzie made for his Gaelic readership. “Dry fare” – a criticism – gone. “Cold ground” – a criticism – gone. Negatives become positives: far from being “dry”, the food is praised, it is *taitneach*. Far from being “cold”, the ground is praised, it is an *àilean*, a little meadow. It is not *uaine*, the pale colour of new growth, but *gorm*, the rich, shiny hue of lush healthy grass. And what does Mackenzie drop to make room for this? The compliment to Charles’s blue blood, and the quote from an English song. Mackenzie has quoted plenty of songs and stories in the course of his book, all of them Gaelic ones, seldom or never in direct response to a quote by Chambers.

This is the sort of thing Joshua Fishman was talking about on his recent lecture tour. We have to know what our culture is and apply it. This is tricky for Gaelic speakers when the state and the media are playing another tune – Chambers’s tune, in which our ground is cold, our diet is poor, we are “remote”, our language is unknown to “professionals”, and the heroes and heroines whom we are encouraged to admire all contrive to come from somewhere else.

Mackenzie’s is a voice from an era in which the Gael still had a strong belief in himself and herself. That belief can be summed up in one word: *cruadal*. Toughness. Gaels were not merely tough but lean, brave and independent, they could run faster than anyone else, they drank whisky rather than beer, their diet was good because it was simple (milk, butter, cheese, crowdie, oats, potatoes, fish), and – thanks to fresh air, clean water, simple housing, and settlements far enough apart to resist epidemics – they were very, very healthy. The sixteenth-century writer Hector Boece, principal of Aberdeen University, never stopped banging out the message that the rest of Scotland had gone soft and must return to these Gaelic virtues. The eighteenth-century writer Martin Martin was sent by Edinburgh’s first professor of medicine to tour the islands and ask a lot of questions because there was a general belief that the secrets of health and long life were to be found there. That’s *cruadal*.

In Chambers’s writing the impression is given that the Highlanders were lucky to have the Prince. But in Mackenzie’s translation, in 1,001 different ways, this is altered to an impression that the Prince was lucky to have the Highlanders, and to be in the Highlands.

A further little thought. In 1743 the men of a Highland regiment mutinied when about to be sent off to fight a war in Flanders whose purpose they could not see. The mutineers pointed out that their regiment had been raised as a police force to carry out a specific task with which they agreed – to put down the evil of blackmail in the Highlands. They were of course executed (read John Prebble’s book “Mutiny”). The regiment was the Black Watch.

The Prince’s meal was taken with his three companions at a place which was called by Chambers Corriscorridale and by Mackenzie *Coire-Choradail*, but which is on my map as Coire Sgoir adail. It’s north of the head of Loch Hourn and overlooks Loch Quoich. After resting there all day they decamped double-quick “when, to their indescribable alarm,” says Chambers, “they discovered that they had spent the day within cannon-shot of two of the enemy’s posts, and that at this moment a company of soldiers was employed in their immediate neighbourhood in driving some sheep into a hut for slaughter”.

They walked north into Mackenzie’s native county of Ross-shire, and not surprisingly he sees little need to follow Chambers’s text at this point. According to him, once in Glenshiel the party split up, one pair looking for something to eat, the other looking for a guide who could take them to Poolewe, where they had heard a French ship was waiting to take Charles off. Mackenzie: “The first pair bought food from a farmer in Glenshiel called Cristopher MacRae (*Gillecriosd Mac-Rath*), but the other two failed to find a lad (*dh’fharlaich air an dithis eile gill’ fhaotainn*) to guide them to Poolewe, because companies of the red army were spread all over the countryside from Fort Augustus to Strome ferry (*port an t-Sròim*).”

This is very different from Chambers, who uses two different sources to tell an involved story which presents MacRae as mean at best, and a thief at worst. Mackenzie seems to be right – the story has since been discredited. More to the point, as far as our loyal *Rosach* is concerned, is the fact that after the party has reunited they meet a MacDonald well known to them who is fleeing from his native Glengarry, where his father was killed by soldiers the previous day. He undertakes to be their guide, and brings them east to a secure place where (according to other sources) they spend the morning of 23 July, covering the Prince with heather to keep off the midges; then, when they hear firing, he guides them to “the top of a high hill betwixt the Braes of Glenmorrison and Strathglass, where they lodged all night, the Prince reposing in an open cave so narrow as not to permit him to stretch himself”.

Mackenzie isn't interested in this, but Chambers points out that it's one of the most uncomfortable nights the Prince has ever spent, and it rings true. “The rain had fallen heavily and incessantly during the whole of the preceding day, and he was of course wet to the skin. No fire could be had to dry him. Without food, and deprived of sleep by the narrowness and hardness of his bed, the only comfort he could obtain was the miserable one of smoking a pipe.”

Cruadal? Well, a Highlander would probably have slept, or so we're told. Sir Walter Scott had a story about a young boy who spent a winter's night under the same plaid with Rob Roy's lieutenant, a large bearded man. Bit by bit he pulled more of the plaid over himself, and when he woke up in the morning he was aghast to see his companion covered in hoar frost. He was much relieved when the big man simply woke up, shook himself, rubbed off the frost with the plaid and muttered: *Oidhch' fhuar!* “Cold night!”

It occurs to us at this point that in terms of Chambers's narrative Prince Charles is Everyman, the normal among the abnormal, “us” as opposed to “them”, serving the same purpose as David Balfour in “Kidnapped” or Kevin Costner in “Dancing with Wolves”. For a Gaelic readership accustomed to *sgeulachdan* the role is subtly different: he has to be presented as *mac an rìgh* (which is no problem) but a little more surreal, a little less ordinary, a little more like Superman. The man-eating giants who surround the *mac an rìgh* figure in *sgeulachdan* are of course the red army, but that leaves the heroic Gael out of the picture . . .

Cue, stage right, the Seven Men of Glenmorrison. *Pàdruig Grannd. Iain Dòmhnallach. Alasdair Dòmhnallach. Griogair Mac-Ghriogair. Alasdair Siosal. Dòmhnall Siosal. Uisdean Siosal.* “Rendered desperate,” says Chambers, “they had entered into an association of offence and defence against the duke and his army, binding themselves by solemn oath never to yield, to fight on any particular emergency to the last drop of their blood, and never till the day of their death to give up their arms.”

The Glengarry man leads Charles to these desperadoes. Truly they are Robin Hood and his merry men. Chambers lists some of their exploits, and Mackenzie eagerly repeats them. Here's an example. A Strathspey man called Robert Grant has been going around informing on as many as he could see (*dol mu'n cuairt a bhrath cho liugha sa' chitheadh e*) who had “been in the rebellion” (Chambers), “risen with Charles” (*a dh-éirich le Tearlach*, Mackenzie). Chambers: “They shot him dead, and cutting off his head, placed it upon a tree in a little wood near the high road in Glenmorrison.” Mackenzie: *Thilg iad e . . . , sgar iad a cheann bho chorp agus cheangail iad e le gad seilich ri craoibh chaothrain os-ceann an rathaid mhòir ann an Gleann-Moireaston.* (“They shot him . . . , separated his head from his body and tied it with a willow withy to a rowan tree above the main road in Glenmorrison.”)

“It long remained as a terror to similar evil-doers,” says Chambers, and for “terror” Mackenzie has *sùlachan*, a Ross-shire word for “warning” which he has used before.

As a precaution, Charles is introduced to the Seven Men as young Clanranald, but they were all in the Jacobite army and they recognise him immediately. Chambers: “He was received by them with the greatest demonstrations of fidelity and kindness, and conducted to their cave.” Mackenzie: *Bhuail iad am basan le aighear, agus ghlaodh iad: “Am Prionns'! Am Prionns'! a bheatha do Choire-ghoth.”* (“They clapped their hands with joy, and shouted: ‘The Prince! The Prince! Welcome to Coiraghoth!’”)

I will be careful from now on about claiming that clapping hands was only done at funerals.

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