

Charlie's Year (36): The Seven Men of Glenmoriston

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IT'S 24 July 1746, and a scene takes place which surely inspired every thrilling story there has ever been about the Famous Five or the Magnificent Seven. We're in a cave – or rather a cavity in a cairn of stones – at Coire Ghoth in the heights of Glenmoriston. It's been described as “resembling three-quarters of an umbrella resting on a spur”. Inside there's a curving entrance, a hearth, plenty of dry gravel, and an en-suite water supply – a babbling stream running so close under the side where the sleeping-quarters are that all you need do is stretch a skillet through one of two gaps in the rock wall.

Needless to say, this rural prototype of “Wullie's Shed” sleeps at least seven, for it's the abode of the Seven Men of Glenmoriston. Tonight the weary Prince Charles is to be their honoured guest, but first he requests that they swear an oath. Oaths are a lot of fun, as Enid Blyton and Richmal Crompton knew well, and in his “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” of 1840 Robert Chambers claims that they swore “that their backs should be to God, and their faces to the devil, that all the curses the Scriptures did pronounce might come upon them and all their posterity, if they did not stand firm to the Prince in the greatest dangers, and if they should discover to any person, man, woman, or child, that the Prince was in their keeping, till once his person should be out of danger”.

Curiously, in the book which was supposed to be a translation of this, John Mackenzie's “Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa” of 1844, the oath is much simpler. It omits the devil, and instead Mackenzie tells us that they swore *air an cuid biodag*, on their dirks, which brings us back to the pre-Christian belief in iron as a repository of the magical power that can be used by human beings against supernatural forces. They swore, says Mackenzie, *gu'm biodh iad dìleas gu bàs, agus nach innseadh iad do dhuine, no mhnaoi, no phàiste, gu'n robh am Prionnsa maille riu gu ceann latha 's bliadhna*: “that they would be faithful unto death, and that they would tell no man, woman or child that the Prince was with them until the end of a day and a year”.

Charles had MacDonald of Glenaladale with him to act as interpreter. This raises, not for the first time, the issue of Charles's own knowledge of Gaelic, and there's a difference in approach between our two sources which illustrates the cultural chasm we're still struggling with today. Chambers tells us that the men were “unable to speak a word of English”, and Mackenzie translates this as *cha robh aig a mhòrachd rìoghail ach droch Ghàelig, agus cha robh aig na gaisgeich ach bristidhean Beurla*. “His royal highness's Gaelic was poor, and the heroes had only some broken bits of English.”

Glenaladale's next job is to interpret the conversation. It's typical of the sort of exchange that Mackenzie leaves out. Charles jokes to the men that they are the first privy council he has sworn in since Culloden, and says more seriously that he will never forget them if ever he comes to his own. In reply, one of them recalls a priest in Glenmoriston saying that King Charles II was not very mindful of his friends when he was restored to his throne. This was historically true, especially in Ireland, where Cromwell had driven Catholic landowners over the Shannon to Connacht, and Charles II – the Prince's grand-uncle – had reneged on his promise to give them their land back. “Their guest said he was heartily sorry for that, and hoped he should act differently – for this he gave them his word, the word of a Prince.”

The plan was for the Glenmoriston men to protect the Prince while arrangements were made to get him away to France on board a ship from Poolewe. We would expect Mackenzie to be the best source for this, as he was born in 1806 at Meallan Thearlaich on Loch Ewe and spent his boyhood lapping up the ceilidh-house chatter of the district. He may have sat at the feet of the odd 90-year-old who would have been 20 in 1746.

According to Chambers, sixty young Frenchmen had formed themselves into a volunteer company with the sole purpose of rescuing the Prince. They remind me of Médecins sans Frontières. They sailed from Dunkirk and landed at Poolewe in June with four officers. Two of these were immediately captured, of whom one, named Fitzgerald and presumably therefore an Irishman, was hanged at Fort William on the charge of having been a spy in Flanders. The other two wandered around south-west Ross trying to find the Prince, and eventually made contact with Cameron of Lochiel, of which more later. But Mackenzie has more detail. There were two French ships, he says. *Thainig na longan so a steach do Chaolas*

Eilean-Iù ma mheadhon an t-sàmhraidh. “These ships came into the Sound of the Isle of Ewe about midsummer.” This means around 15–25 June, when the Prince was in South Uist. Two of the four officers crossed the hills to Knoydart while the other two took the high road to Fort Augustus and were arrested; the one who was hanged at Fort William was called Patrick Fitzgerald. *Fhuair an dithis eile a ghabh rathad Chnòideart air falbh do’n Fhràing maille ris a’ Phrionnsa féin.* “The other two who took the Knoydart route got away to France along with the Prince himself.” They may have just missed the Prince, because we know that he was in Knoydart on 8 July.

By the first week of August it’s like a minuet in which the partners never touch. The Prince sends a messenger to find out whether there’s a ship waiting for him at Poolewe or not. Meanwhile the Seven Men bring him north from one safe place to another as far as Cannich in Strathglass. “His messenger, before setting out, had been appointed to bring him intelligence to a particular place, judged convenient for the purpose.” So says Chambers; Mackenzie is more specific. The messenger is one of the *gaisgeich* or Seven Men; the rendezvous is *air mulach Beinn-Eacharain*, on the top of Beinn-Eacharain in the braes of Strathglass. For two days they wait there in what Chambers calls a shieling and Mackenzie a *taigh-frìthe* or hunting-bothy. When the messenger finally arrives, it’s with the news that one ship has come and gone, leaving two men who set out for Lochaber (Chambers), or that two ships have come and gone, leaving four men, of whom three have gone to look for him in Lochaber (Mackenzie).

Two things reported by Chambers are worth mentioning. According to Peter Grant, one of the Seven, at Glen Cannich on Lammass day (1 August) the Prince speaks much of one of the daughters of the king of France, drinks her health and makes the Seven do likewise. Another of the Seven, John Macdonnell, says that he wishes she were there with them, and that they would take even greater care of her than of him. Amidst laughter the Prince replies: “God forbid, for, were she here and seized, to ransom her person I would make peace upon any terms the Elector of Hanover would propose.”

Chambers’s other point is about Gaelic. Macdonnell seems to have been the sharpest of the seven; the Prince got the idea that his name was Ho Sian because that’s what he kept hearing the other six say when they referred to him. The Rev. Robert Forbes, who picked this up from Grant himself, wrote that it was said to Macdonnell’s face and meant *Aos Ian* “Hark you, John!” I think it can only be *Thuirt Iain*, “John says . . .” This proves two things, very usefully. One is that Forbes, Chambers’s best source, was no Gaelic speaker. The other is that Charles still hadn’t twigged that what comes first in a Gaelic sentence is the verb and not the subject.

They travel south again with the aim of making contact with Cameron of Lochiel, and on the night of 19 August, says Chambers (actually it was the 14th), they are in the braes of Glengarry. “When they came to the Garry water, it was found breast-deep with the rain; nevertheless, they crossed it in safety.”

Mackenzie has the story in more detail. *’Nuair a rainig iad Uisge-Gharaidh mhothaich iad gu’n robh an àth air éiridh le sileadh na dìle, agus ged a bha’n linne ruigsinn nan achlasan aig na gaisgeich, ’nuair ’chaidh na treun-laoich ’an guailean a’ chéile, thug iad am Prionns agus Fear-Ghlinn-Aladail sàbhailte “gu bruaich!”* (“When they came to the Garry Water, they realised that the ford had risen in the pouring rain, and although the pool reached up to the oxters of the Seven, by means of those brave heroes going shoulder to shoulder, they brought the Prince and Glenaladale safely ‘to bank’!”)

I think this is the same method used by the Prince’s army to ford the Esk on 20 December 1745 – the cavalry entered the river first and lined up shoulder to shoulder to break the force of the current while the infantry crossed downstream.

They spent the next day in a bothy at Achnasaul near the foot of Loch Arkaig where, in Glenaladale’s words, it rained “as heavily within as without”. They were joined by two more of the Prince’s officers, MacDonald of Lochgarry and Cameron of Clunes. Their job done, the Seven Men slipped back home, all except Peter Grant, who was persuaded to stay till the Prince could get some money to pay them for their services.

The Camerons built the Prince a bothy in the woods at Achnasaul where he remained for about a week, before moving him to another one near Achnacarry, where Lochiel’s house had been destroyed. It was at Achnacarry that he made contact with the two French officers from Poolewe. It was considered very suspicious that these two men, “strangers, without one

word of Earse”, could have found their way there without being arrested, so Charles played the role of a “Captain Drummond” for the occasion, telling them that his master the Prince was in hiding, and delivering to them a letter – from himself. They proved genuine, but they were of little use.

When still at Achnasaul, Charles had a major fright. He was asleep, as was Clunes’s son who was with him, while Grant kept watch. Uncharacteristically, Grant was nodding at his post when he realised with horror that what looked like a party of armed militia was approaching. He woke the Prince and said they should flee uphill. Charles said no, they had the advantage of surprise. They laid their muskets along the stones and were about to fire when suddenly they realised that one of the party was Clunes.

Clunes was bringing two of Lochiel’s brothers, Dr Archibald Cameron and the Rev. John Cameron. The latter afterwards described the Prince as he found him that day. “He was barefooted, had an old black kilt coat on, philabeg and waistcoat, a dirty shirt, and a long red beard, a gun in his hand, a pistol and dirk by his side. He was very cheerful and in good health, and, in my opinion, fatter than when he was at Inverness. They had killed a cow the day before, and the servants were roasting some of it with spits. The Prince knew their names, spoke in a familiar way to them, and some Earse.”

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