

Charlie's Year (38): The Prince sails away

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

ON 5 September 1746, along with Cameron of Lochiel, Dr Archibald Cameron, MacDonnell of Lochgarry, Cluny MacPherson, MacPherson of Breakachie and some trusted servants, Prince Charles moved still deeper into hiding. Their destination was Leitir na Lic, a wooded slope of Ben Alder, where Cluny had built himself the refuge known ever since as “Cluny’s Cage”. Here, in my translation, is how John Mackenzie described it in “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” of 1844, which was supposed to be a translation of Robert Chambers’s “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6” of 1840. “This bothy had been constructed in the midst of a wilderness of stones and outcrops of trees (*gharbhlach chlach a’s chràmasg chraobh*) in the face of a high, steep mountain. It was enclosed by a dyke (*dig*) in front, and by a high grey rock behind.

“A place had been made for smoke to get out along the face of this rock, and since the smoke and the rock were of the same colour, when it dispersed or climbed up the face of the rock, as my informant (*m’ fhear sgeòil*) told me, ‘No man has ever had an eye in his head (*sùil ’na chlaigeann*) that could distinguish between it and the rock. The gentry (*uaislean*) called this refuge (*taigh-dhiona*) the fairy mound (*sith-bhruth*), and indeed it was a good name for it, for the fairies (*sìochraichean*) could not be safer in their own dwelling (*’nam bruth féin*) than were the residents of this hall (*luchd-còmhnaidh an talla so*)!’”

This piece of tradition sounds as authentic as anything in Mackenzie’s book. It’s one of the few places where he makes it crystal clear that he is tapping directly into oral tradition. I know of no other source which calls Cluny’s Cage a *sith-bhruth*, but it’s very appropriate. A *bruth*, or rather *brugh*, is a fairy residence as viewed from the inside, and the men who lived in the Cage had all the qualities of fairies: moving silently by night, they exercised power over the lives of ordinary people from holes in the ground; here today, gone tomorrow, they led an ambivalent existence, half gods, half men, and were spoken of in whispers.

Chambers had taken his description of how the Cage was built from Breakachie’s reminiscences. “There were first some rows of trees laid down, in order to level a floor for the habitation, and as the place was steep, this raised the lower side to equal height with the other, and these trees, in the way of joists of planks, were entirely well levelled with earth and gravel. There were, betwixt the trees, growing naturally on their own roots, some stakes fixed in the earth, which, with the trees, were interwoven with ropes made of heath and birch twigs all to the top of the Cage, it being of a round, or rather oval shape, and the whole thatched and covered with fog.”

By fog he means moss. He goes on: “This whole fabric hung, as it were, by a large tree which reclined from the one end all along the roof to the other, and which gave it the name of the Cage; and by chance there happened to be two stones, at a small distance from [each] other, next the precipice, resembling the pillars of a bosom chimney, and here was the fire placed. The smoke had its vent out there, all along a very stony part of the rock, which and the smoke were so much of a colour, that no one could have distinguished the one from the other in the clearest day.”

It’s impossible to know for sure where Cluny’s Cage was, as no trace of it exists today, but in his book “Legends of the Cairngorms” the late Affleck Gray described a likely site high above the Alder Burn on the west side of Ben Alder. “From there the view to Corroul and the north west is uninterrupted. A lookout must have been posted south of there on the Doune, from which there is a clear view of the Loch Ericht valley eastwards to Binnein Mór to the north of Cluny Castle.”

The Prince spent just a week in the Cage. The day after he arrived, two French ships, *L’Heureux* and *La Princesse de Conti*, put into Loch nan Uamh in Moidart, having been sent by his father to take him off. A Captain Sheridan and a Lt O’Beirne came ashore. They made contact with MacDonald of Glenaladale, who had last seen the Prince at Achnacarry in Lochaber about 21 August. Glenaladale went straight back to Achnacarry to find the Prince, and at this point we are treated to the last of those dramatic incidents which are related cogently by Chambers, then milked by Mackenzie for all they are worth. Looking for Cameron of Clunes, Glenaladale found that the bothy where he had been staying had been destroyed by the military, and was thrown “into a state of great perplexity and distress”.

Mackenzie says (I translate): “We may now imagine that Glenaladale was in great distress (*ann am mòr chàmpar*) when he found the bothy in which he had left Charles burnt to the ground by the redcoats, leaving him no way of knowing where to go and look for him. Glenaladale was now in great perplexity (*ann an imcheist mhòir*), going backwards and forwards (*a dol an null ’sa’ nall*), seeking Charles at random (*air seacharan*), knowing that if he did not find him quickly the ships would go home without him, as had the two ships which came into Loch Ewe in midsummer.”

Mackenzie says that Glenaladale spent three days like this until he met an old woman who told him that the Prince was in Badenoch with Cluny. This seems like a simplification: according to Chambers the woman tells him where Clunes is hiding, and Clunes sends a messenger to the Prince in Badenoch. The name of the messenger is given by Chambers as John Maccoilveen; Mackenzie turns this into Iain Mac-Coilbhinn, but this only serves to remind us that he is unreliable with respect to names. It’s Iain mac Dhòmhnail Bhàin. By great good fortune, on his way into Badenoch this man met Cluny and Dr Cameron, whom the Prince had sent on an errand to Loch Arkaig.

The Prince had been saved by the organisational genius of Cluny MacPherson and his own usual good luck, which had deserted him only once in his life – the day Culloden was fought. His journey west with his friends from the Cage to Loch nan Uamh was curiously riotous. At Corvoy (*Coire a’ Mhaighe*) near Moy on 14 September they felt so safe that they spent the day throwing their bonnets in the air and shooting at them. Cluny had a secret store of meal in Glenroy, and a cow was killed for them as well. As Mackenzie says: *Spad iad bò ann an so, agus rinn iad an suipeir air aran corc’ a’s fèidil a’s slige no dha an fhir de dh’uisge-beatha*. “They slaughtered a cow here, and made their supper of oatcakes and meat and a shell or two of whisky each.”

They crossed the Lochy in an old boat brought by Clunes from Loch Arkaig, the only one in Lochaber not burned by the redcoats. Clunes also provided six bottles of brandy purloined from Fort Augustus, and they drank three of them before crossing. “In the third and last ferrying,” says Chambers, “the crazy boat leaked so much, that there would be four or five pints of water in the bottom, and in hurrying over, the three remaining bottles of brandy were all broke. When the Prince called for a dram, he was told that the bottles were broke, and that the common fellows had drunk all that was in the bottom of the boat, as being good punch, which had made the fellows so merry, that they made great diversion to the company as they marched along.”

Large numbers of officers and men gathered at Loch nan Uamh to sail for France with Charles. Chambers claims that he waited there “upwards of a day” for them all to arrive. Mackenzie makes it three days – *fad thri latha*. Modern scholarship seems nearer the mark – Charles reached Borrodale on 19 September and embarked that day on *L’Heureux*, which weighed anchor shortly after midnight.

I believe it is said in Gleann Cholm Chille in Donegal that Charles landed there on his way back to France and stayed for a month. If he landed there at all, he certainly didn’t stay a month, for we know that on Monday 29 September *L’Heureux* anchored off Roscoff in Brittany and Charles went ashore in the ship’s boat to the sound of a twenty-one-gun salute.

Charlie’s Year was over, but Chambers has a great deal more to say. Although his book is entitled “History of the Rebellion of 1745–6”, he now gives us a chapter on the trials and executions carried out by the British government, one on Prince Charles in France, one on the measures taken to prevent further “disturbances”, one on the subsequent life of the Prince – and a fascinating appendix consisting of the Jacobite army’s account sheet. I think the attitude of the government is well summed up by Lt-Col. Joseph Yorke, one of Cumberland’s officers, who hoped that the army would “extirpate the race if we are not stopt by lenity”. He said before Culloden: “I don’t doubt soon but we shall have shut ’em up within the lochs where it will be at least a summer’s work to clear those parts of ’em and to destroy their clannism, but it must be gone through with.”

A series of acts were passed disarming the Highland people, outlawing Highland dress, removing the powers of the chiefs and abolishing the Episcopal church. These were enforced without regard to who had done what in 1745–46, as the government had discovered that all Highlanders were Jacobites, believing as they did in an immutable hierarchy of God, king and chief. This infuriated those who had come out for the government, men like Duncan Ban Macintyre, who now declared:

*Nan tigeadh oirne Teàrlach
'S gun éireamaid 'na champa,
Gheibhte breacain chàrnaid
'S bhiodh àird air na gunnachan.*

(“If Charles were to come upon us / And we rose to take the field with him, / Red tartan plaids would be found / And guns would be forthcoming.”) The Highlands seethed with anger for another ten years, but Charles never did come back. There were, I think, three reasons for this. Firstly, he never got the political support he needed from the French or Spanish. Secondly, like many others before and since, he was mentally damaged by the stress of the war and of his hair-raising escapes – he was, after all, only 25 years old. (His lieutenant-general, the 33-year-old duke of Perth, was on the run for only three weeks before he found a ship to take him away, and was so ill that he died on board.) Thirdly, as we have noticed, he learned from his Highland friends how to take solace in the bottle, and, as Chambers shows well, it destroyed him: he lost his Austrian wife, then his friends, finally his servants, and died in Italy in 1788, aged 67.

Mackenzie says nothing of such things. *L'Heureux* sails away, teardrops fall, but those on board, he says, look forward to returning soon “*le pannal ghruagach a luaigheadh an clò ruadh gu daigheann*”. So he ends the story with a quote from the poet mac Mhaighstir Alastair, and the rest of *his* book consists simply of seventeen Jacobite songs, among which is “Morag” (the Prince’s code-name, as he reminds us), which begins:

*A Mhòrag chiatach a chuil dualaich,
Gur h-e do luaidh a th'air m'aire,*

*'S ma dh'imich thu null thar chuan uaine
Gum a luath a thig thu thairis*

*'S cùimhnich 'thoir leat pannal ghruagach
'Luaigheas an clò ruadh gu daigheann.*

(“Lovely Morag of the curly hair, / To sing your praise is my intention, / And if you’ve gone across the sea from us / May you come back over quickly / But remember, bring a band of girls / Who will waulk the red cloth firmly.”)

The waulking girls – French troops – never came.

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