The cow that ate the piper

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

Last time I picked a couple of well-defined locations and showed how different people reacted to them at different times. Let me now take a third example.

Most **WHFP** readers will be familiar with Glenmoriston, even if only as the long green glen that you drive through to get from Skye to Inverness, or as the bit of it that you pass through on the way to Fort William, Glasgow or Edinburgh.

If you take the Inverness road you cross a burn tumbling down from the hills to your right called *Allt an Eòin*, the Stream of the Bird. There's good level ground here. It used to be a market stance (*aonach*) for black cattle on the drove route from Skye to the great trysts at Crieff or Falkirk.

There was an inn too at one time, *Taigh an Aonaich* or "the inn at Anoch". From the culvert, you can make out its drystone ruins a little below the road, about two-and-a-half miles down the glen from the Invergarry junction, one-and-a-half miles up from the farm buildings at Achlain (*an t-Achadh Leathann*, "Broadfield").

Samuel Johnson and James Boswell came to Anoch on 31 August 1773. They were on their way from Fort Augustus, travelling on horseback along the brand-new military road to Glenelg. It climbed the hillside from the fort by a spectacular series of hairpin bends, then headed westwards for five miles across the moor before dropping gently into Glenmoriston at Achlain. "Passing on through the dreariness of solitude," writes Johnson, "we found a party of soldiers from the fort, working on the road, under the superintendence of a serjeant. We told them how kindly we had been treated at the garrison, and as we were enjoying the benefit of their labours, begged leave to shew our gratitude by a small present.

"Early in the afternoon we came to Anoch, a village in *Glenmorrison* of three huts, one of which is distinguished by a chimney. Here we were to dine and lodge, and were conducted through the first room, that had the chimney, into another lighted by a small glass window . . . The house was built like other huts of loose stones, but the part in which we dined and slept was lined with turf and wattled with twigs, which kept the earth from falling. Near it was a garden of turnips and a field of potatoes. It stands in a glen, or valley, pleasantly watered by a winding river."

Boswell confirms: "The house here was built of thick turfs and thatched with thinner turfs and heath. It had three rooms in length, and a little room projected. Where we sat, the side-walls were *wainscotted*, as Mr Johnson said, with wands very well plaited."

The landlord, Lachlan MacQueen, had come out for Prince Charles in 1745 and remained in his army until after Culloden. He lived here with his charming daughter, who caught Johnson's fancy in particular. He remained the tenant till about 1788, then moved to a farm nearby. Alexander MacDonald ("Gleannach", 1860–1928), who published "Story and Song from Loch Ness-Side" in 1914, recalled hearing about it. "This inn at Aonach was tenanted for about eighteen years afterwards by Donald MacDonald, our own grandfather; and our father, who died recently, distinctly remembered 'the auld hoose'."

The "eighteen years" bring us to 1806, when a new road, engineered by Thomas Telford and built by the Highland Roads and Bridges Commissioners, was made all the way down to Invermoriston, a bridge being erected to carry it over the river four miles downstream at Torgyle. A new inn sprang up at the bridge, followed by a church, and the military road fell out of use. Says MacDonald: "With Torgyle inn is associated a version of the famous story which tells of a horse having on a certain occasion eaten an English trooper who was taking the way, and who had been put to sleep in the stable; the only foundation for the story being that the trooper's top-boots were found in the manger after the wearer had quietly disappeared."

The trouble with this is that the "famous story" describes an event alleged to have taken place in 1746, even though there was no inn at Torgyle till about 1806. William Mackay, the author of "Urquhart and Glenmoriston" (1893), is quite clear about this: "After the time of General Wade, and perhaps for some time before it, there was a small inn at Aonach in Glenmoriston, which was discontinued many years ago when the present inn at Torgoil was opened."

So the "famous story" had drifted down the road from Aonach. Or had it? That depends on whether or not it bore any relationship to the truth. It's so well known to folklorists that they've given it a number – AT 1281A. Samuel Lover told a version of it in "Legends and Stories of Ireland" (1831). In "Scottish Traditional Tales" (1994), in a chapter called "Other Cleverness, Stupidity and Nonsense", Alan Bruford and Donald Archie MacDonald print a Lowland version called "The Wandering Piper" which Bruford got from a traveller called Willie McPhee in 1991. It's been heard, they say, from Finland to Mexico. This is underlined in an article in the Irish folklore journal "Béaloideas" (1999) entitled, revealingly, "The Cow that Ate the Pedlar in Kerry and Wyoming".

The Torgyle connection comes in one of the earliest printed versions, in John Mackenzie's "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" (1844). This is supposed to be a history of the '45, but Mackenzie preferred stories to history, and he defaces the end of his chapter on Culloden with a huge footnote in which he tells our tale. I'll translate. "Twelve men and a piper belonging to the Clan MacRae were fleeing the battlefield. The piper sat down in a thicket of willow beside the path to wrap up his pipes in his plaid. He was not long in this spot when he was noticed by a passing trooper, who dismounted to kill him. The piper was armed only with his dirk, but before the trooper could steady himself it was sunk to the haft in his body.

"When the piper had relieved the Englishman of the money in his pocket he tried to remove his boots. They were so tight around the calves that no amount of pulling would release them, so the piper cut off the Englishman's legs about the knees with his dirk, and threw them into his plaid along with his pipes. Then he took off after his companions, but he could see no sign of them.

"That night the MacRaes reached Torgyle in Glenmoriston, where there was a little inn beside the track leading to Kintail. As there was not enough room for so many men to sleep in the inn, they lay down in the barn, warning the innkeeper that anyone who troubled them during the night would be put to death for his pains.

"Around midnight the piper reached Torgyle covered in sweat. He asked the maidservant who opened the door if she had seen twelve MacRaes going down [sic, *sìos*] the glen (at this time all the clans were known to each other by the particular tartan they all wore). 'Yes,' says the girl, 'but they haven't moved on yet. They're sleeping in the barn over there.'

"'I'll join them,' says the piper.

"'You had better not,' says the girl. 'They said not to let anyone near them till morning. It won't be safe for you to go where they are, but I'll make up a bed for you in the byre and you will be much cosier.'

"When the piper had had his supper and his dram he and the girl went out to the byre. It was a very cold night, and the piper said he would lie down in the manger in front of the brindled cow. The girl asked why he should do that. The piper said the cow's breath would keep him fine and warm. So he lay down in the manger in front of the cow and the maid spread a good covering of hay over him.

"As soon as the girl had left the byre the piper got busy, and by daybreak he had got the Englishman's legs out of the boots. He threw them down in the stall in front of the brindled cow, and wrapped up the boots in his plaid along with his pipes.

"Around dawn he and the other Kintail men continued their journey. The girl from the inn went to the byre to wish the piper good morning, and when she reached the place where her darling had been lying, all she found in 'her lover's place' was the Englishman's legs. She clapped her hands in anguish, screamed with fright, and rushed back to the innkeeper in floods of tears. He asked what the matter was. '*Och nan och*,' she says, 'the brindled cow has eaten the piper since last night, there's nothing left of him but the legs.'

"Straight away the innkeeper rushed out with his axe, slaughtered the cow and buried it with the Englishman's legs in the same grave."

Mackenzie, writing in 1844, is alleging that this happened in 1746. We've established that if there's any kernel of truth in it, it happened at Aonach. Now consider what Johnson wrote about Aonach in 1773. "In the evening the soldiers, whom we had passed on the road, came to spend at our inn the little money that we had given them. They had the true military impatience of coin in their pockets, and had marched at least six miles to find the first place where liquor could be bought.

"Having never been before in a place so wild and unfrequented, I was glad of their arrival, because I knew that we had made them friends, and to gain still more of their good will, we went to them, where they were carousing in the barn, and added something to our former gift. All that we gave was not much, but it detained them in the barn, either merry or quarrelling, the whole night, and in the morning they went back to their work, with great indignation at the bad qualities of whisky."

And this is how Boswell records the night in his journal: "Near to this, we had passed a party of soldiers under a sergeant at work upon the road. We gave them two shillings to drink. They came to this house and made merry in the barn. We went out, Mr Johnson saying, 'Come, let's go and give 'em another shilling apiece.' We did so, and he was saluted 'My Lord' by all of 'em.

"The poor soldiers got too much liquor. Some of 'em fought and left blood upon the spot, and cursed whisky next morning . . .

"Wednesday 1 September. I awaked very early. I began to imagine that the landlord, being about to emigrate, might murder us to get our money and lay it upon the soldiers in the barn. Such groundless fears will arise in the mind before it has resumed its vigour after sleep! Mr Johnson had had the same kind of ideas; for he told me afterwards that he considered so many soldiers, having seen us, would be witnesses should any harm be done; and the thought of that, I suppose, he considered would make us secure."

Something seems to be reverberating through time. But in what direction? Soldiers, barn, drink, innkeeper's daughter . . . I have three theories. Could it be that someone (surely not MacQueen) told Johnson and Boswell the story of the cow that ate the piper? Or did MacQueen give them a genuine account of some atrocity that happened here in the aftermath of Culloden, the core of truth to which "The Cow that Ate the Piper" was later grafted?

Or was it the other way round? Johnson's "Journey" (1774) and Boswell's "Tour" (1785) were best-sellers. Soldiers, barn, drink, innkeeper's daughter . . . Was the fame of the two books sufficient to cause a version of "The Cow that Ate the Piper" to take root in Glenmoriston?

For my money, the fact that Mackenzie speaks of Torgyle rather than Aonach suggests that Gaelic tradition *wasn't* influenced by the books. I'd go for the "core of truth" theory – and a second look at Alexander MacDonald's précis reveals what that "core of truth" was.

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