

The House of the Steep Climb

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THE madness after Culloden, a girl is raped and her grandmother murdered by redcoats in an inn on the shore of Loch Ness.

Twenty-seven years later, on 30 August 1773, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell arrive at the same house. It's an inn no longer, but they enter anyway, with their servant and their guides. That's five men altogether, including two six-footers – the corpulent Johnson and the moustachio'd servant, Joseph.

The woman of the house is there with her three youngest children. Her husband and two eldest sons are away at work. The strangers want to know where she sleeps. She's frightened at being asked such a question, and says so.

Her fears now seem to be confirmed, for Boswell produces some paper from his greatcoat pocket, rolls it up, lights it at the fire where a stew is bubbling away – then advances into the darkness of her bedroom.

Johnson and Boswell know nothing of the rape and murder. Over the years, the story of their insensitivity becomes well known in the Highlands. There's no documentary proof of what happened in 1746, but plenty for what happened in 1773. Then, in 1985, doubt is cast on whether the house they visited was the one where the crime was alleged to have been committed.

Was it or wasn't it? That's the question I want to examine, and the best place to start is the earliest recorded account of the crime. It's in a paper called "Tales of Old Days on the Aldourie Estate", read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1924 by Lt.-Col. Neil Fraser-Tytler. Talking about the road running south-west along the shore of Loch Ness from Dores to Foyers, he says: "Beyond what is now called the Whitefield Gate Cottage, 30 yards west of fifth milestone on the right, is a small rough strip of arable land called An Ithir Mhór (the big piece of arable land).

"There was a small change-house kept here, at the time of the battle of Culloden, by an old woman and her grandchild. An officer under Duke William entered and tried to assault the beautiful girl. The grandmother attempted to protect her, and the girl escaped and ran across the hill to Baile Cheatharnaich (the town of the freebooter) to raise the people. When the *feachd* (band of men) arrived they found the old woman dead in her chair, having been choked to death by the officer in his wrath.

"The Duke at Fort-Augustus, on hearing of it, was very angry, and made the officer pay blood money, which was duly paid. In this house lived Balnain's forester in 1773, when Johnson and Boswell entered and had the amusing interview which they both wrote about."

Fraser-Tytler adds that a commemorative stone was placed here in May 1923. In a copy of his paper which I've seen in the National Library, he gives his source: "These notes come chiefly from one James Gow, of Erchit – born April, 1803; died September, 1903 – a man of marvellous memory, and were compiled by the late Dr. Sinton, of Dores, and myself in 1921. N.F.T."

Sinton mentioned the inn himself in a paper called "A Day at Boleskine and Foyers" which he read to the Society in 1912. "A few hundred yards after passing the Whitefield gate, we again examined close to the road, on our right, the remains of Tigh an Ire Mhóir, which had been long a public-house, and was entered by Johnson and Boswell on their tour to the Hebrides. It was at that time occupied by Mr William Fraser of Balnain's ground officer, or *punndair*."

Let's consider first the crime, then the location. Fraser-Tytler says the grandmother was murdered but leaves it unclear whether or not the girl was raped. Such uncertainty is typical of rape cases. Again, the Duke of Cumberland is shown in a surprisingly favourable light, but we should bear in mind that Fraser-Tytler had been a lieutenant-colonel in the Army.

In his book "The Highland Jaunt" (1954), Moray McLaren, who had Inverness connections and access to what was said locally, described the crime differently. "In 1746, after the battle of Culloden, an officer of Cumberland's troops had entered this cottage and had found the men of the house away from home, and only a young girl and her grandmother in charge. He had ravished the girl with the assistance of some of his troops who held her

arms and legs and then, in some on-rush of post-lustful fear, had strangled the grandmother in order to silence her.

“His horrible crime, however, was detected and brought home to him, one hopes by the confession of one of his assistants. He was, so it is said, heavily punished, whatever that may mean, by Cumberland, who thought that this was going a bit too far even in the savage Highlands.”

The location is the eastern shore of Loch Ness. There may have been nothing here until General Wade built a road along the lochside from Inverness to Foyers in 1732. I understand it diverged from the present one a couple of miles south of Dores and followed the brow of the hill for three miles before twisting down to the lochside in two hairpin bends at Whitefield. Then it then stuck firmly to the lochside for another four miles to Inverfarigaig.

Whitefield is halfway between Dores and Foyers. Being also at the foot of Wade’s hairpin bends and directly opposite Drumnadrochit, it’s an obvious landing-place for ferries. Sinton’s Gaelic name for the inn describes it exactly – *Taigh an Diridh Mhóir*, “the House of the Steep Climb”. Fraser-Tytler’s *An Ithir Mhór* looks like a corruption of this, and his translation “the big piece of arable land” is wrong. We find the same place-name element a few miles away above Dores, where another of Wade’s roads climbs steeply up from the lochside: “Dirr Cottage”, “Dirr Wood”.

Now for the voice of scepticism. J. D. Fleeman, the most recent editor of Johnson’s “Journey to the Western Islands”, says: “The traditional site of Mrs Fraser’s cottage is ‘An Ire Mhor’ (the great field), marked by a modern (1923) stone on the roadside (W.), about 13 m. from Inverness . . . Johnson and Boswell do not suggest that they visited a regular hostelry, and the identification of Mrs Fraser’s hut with such a place is implausible.”

It’s not clear to me what problem Fleeman sees here. Fraser-Tytler calls it “a small change-house” (that is, for changing horses along the road). Sinton calls it “a public-house” and says it was now occupied by “Fraser of Balnain’s ground officer, or *punndair*”. A *punndair* is an impounder of stray animals. Boswell himself tells us: “Mr Fraser of Balnain allows him to live in this hut and to keep sixty goats for taking care of his wood.”

No one is suggesting that a Highland inn was necessarily large. In 1731, its customers would have been expected to sit around a fire in the centre of the floor, then either fall asleep where they lay, or go outside and wrap themselves in their plaids. When it was a change-house, there must also have been a stable. And McLaren had some precise information about the change of tenancy. “In 1747 this Mrs Fraser whom Johnson and Boswell interviewed had taken over the small property under the care of her chief, and from relatives who had been compelled to leave it in the preceding year. But she had not forgotten the circumstances in which they had gone.”

So no one is suggesting that the house was still a hostelry when Johnson and Boswell arrived, but in any case the travellers of those days tended to complain that Highland inns never advertised themselves. You can guess why. Johnson and Boswell weren’t offered food. Johnson: “With the true pastoral hospitality, she asked us to sit down and drink whisky.” Boswell: “She asked us to sit down and take a dram. I saw one chair. She said she was as happy as any woman in Scotland. She could hardly speak any English, just detached words. Mr Johnson was pleased at seeing for the first time such a state of human life. She asked for snuff. It is her luxury. She uses a great deal. We had none, but gave her sixpence apiece. She then brought out her whisky bottle. I tasted it, and Joseph and our guides had some. So I gave her sixpence more. She sent us away with many prayers in Erse.”

Fleeman’s second objection betrays another culture-clash: “If Mrs Fraser’s was, as Johnson noted, ‘probably eight English miles’ from Boleskine church, it stood a good deal nearer Inverness (10 m.), than An Ire Mhor (13 m.)” But there were no milestones for Johnson to count. We know that milestones on military roads seldom lasted long. People resented the imposition of English miles, which, like kilometres today, were only about half the length of Scots miles; no one wanted to co-operate with a hated military occupation which put stills and weapons at risk; milestones made good building materials. And Johnson, whose bulk made it hard going for any Highland pony, probably found the second half of his ride more tiring than the first.

Fleeman now calls as witness the Rev. James Bailey of Otley in Yorkshire, who revered Johnson, toured Scotland in his footsteps in 1787, and recorded his experiences. “I came to the cottage which was entered by Johnson . . . As I was alone, I had not the same advantage,

for they spoke no English, and the disappointment seemed equally felt on both sides. I was surprised by the appearance of at least ten people, men and women, who had nearly overturned each other in their eagerness to rush out of the doorway to stare at me. I could do nothing but present my snuffbox . . . [Here] the road is but three or four hundred yards from the margin of the loch.”

Bailey says he got to this place after travelling eight miles from Inverness. Hardly surprising, as he was following Johnson’s printed directions. No wonder there were so many people – he was clearly at the inn of Dores! So I think we may ignore Fleeman when he says: “From this it must be concluded that the exact site of Mrs Fraser’s cottage is not now known.”

Let me give Johnson and Boswell the last word. They had travelled along the hillside road for quite a while after meeting the loch at Dores, and Johnson says: “Near the way, by the waterside, we espied a cottage. This was the first Highland Hut that I had seen; and as our business was with life and manners, we were willing to visit it. To enter a habitation without leave, seems to be not considered here as rudeness or intrusion. The old laws of hospitality still give this licence to a stranger.”

He then describes the house and its occupants. As for Boswell, he begins: “A good way up the Loch, I perceived a little hut with an oldish woman at the door of it. I knew it would be a scene for Mr Johnson. So I spoke of it. ‘Let’s go in,’ said he.”

Then there’s the matter of the bedroom. “Mr Johnson asked me where she slept. I asked one of the guides, who asked her in Erse. She spoke with a kind of high tone. He told us she was afraid we wanted to go to bed to her. This coquetry, or whatever it may be called, of so wretched a like being was truly ludicrous. Mr Johnson and I afterwards made merry upon it. I said it was he who alarmed the poor woman’s virtue. ‘No, sir,’ said he. ‘She’ll say, “There came a wicked young fellow, a wild young dog, who I believe would have ravished me had there not been with him a grave old gentleman who repressed him. But when he gets out of the sight of his tutor, I’ll warrant you he’ll spare no woman he meets, young or old.”’

“‘No,’ said I. ‘She’ll say, “There was a terrible ruffian who would have forced me, had it not been for a gentle, mild-looking youth, who, I take it, was an angel.”’

“Mr Johnson would not hurt her delicacy by insisting to ‘see her bedchamber’, like Archer in *The Beaux’ Stratagem*. But I was of a more ardent curiosity, so I lighted a piece of paper and went into the place where the bed was. There was a little partition of wicker, rather more neatly done than the one for the fold, and close by the wall was a kind of bedstead of wood with heath upon it for a bed; and at the foot of it I saw some sort of blankets or covering rolled up in a heap.”

This woman’s eldest child was 13. If that makes her 46, and if her relative was 19 when raped by the redcoat in the same house, they were the same age. They must have known each other well.

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