

‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ (6)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THIS article is not going to be *about* ‘Moladh Chabair Féidh’, but it will serve as a P.S. to my articles about the song. I am going to tell the exciting story of Donald (or ‘Daniel’) Murchison, who was of a Kintail family celebrated as keepers of Eilean Donnain Castle. He was as well known in his day as his contemporaries Rob Roy MacGregor and Coll MacDonnell of Keppoch (Colla nam Bó).

*Keppoch, Rob Roy, and Daniel Murchison,
Cadets or servants to some chief of clan,
From theft and robberies scarce did ever cease,
Yet ’scaped the halter each, and died in peace.*

That is part of a poem entitled ‘Wade’s Roads in Scotland’, dated 1737, quoted in Robert Chambers’s book ‘Domestic Annals of Scotland’. There is more of it in J B Salmond’s book ‘Wade in Scotland’. The poet, whoever he was, was particularly interested in Murchison, which goes to show that Sir Walter Scott might just as well have written a novel about him as about Rob Roy, in which case there would now be Hollywood movies about Donald Murchison. The poet goes on:

*This last his exiled master’s rents collected,
Nor unto king or law would be subjected.
Though veteran troops upon the confines lay,
Sufficient to make lord and tribe a prey,
Yet passes strong through which no roads were cut
Safe-guarded Seaforth’s clan, each in his hut.
Thus in strongholds the rogue securely lay,
Neither could they by force be driven away
Till his attainted lord and chief of late
By ways and means repurchased his estate.*

That tells the story in a nutshell. The description of Murchison as a ‘rogue’ is reminiscent of Daniel Defoe’s book ‘Rob Roy, the Highland Rogue’. But the two men were different. Being a younger son of the keeper of Eilean Donnain, Donald was sent to Edinburgh to learn the trade of lawyer (or ‘writer’, as it was called in those days). For a short time he acted as factor to Sir John Preston of Preston Hall in Midlothian. Then events took over. The ’15 broke out, Seaforth raised the MacKenzies for King James, and Donald and his elder brother John went with him as field officers of the regiment, Donald as lieutenant-colonel and John as major. John fell at Sheriffmuir, and when Seaforth went into exile in 1716, he entrusted Donald with the management of the estate — or at any rate the mainland part of it, Lewis being looked after by Zachary MacAulay the poet.

As I mentioned in an earlier article, Murchison retook Brahan Castle from the Munros in 1716 with the help of another poet, Murdoch Matheson. Since Seaforth was now a declared rebel, his estate was forfeit, and was in theory being run by a committee of six Forfeited Estates Commissioners from an office in Edinburgh. But what happened in practice was that Donald Matheson ran the estate, raising the rents without difficulty and transmitting them to Seaforth in France and Spain.

The best way to understand Murchison’s success is to think of Bosnia. He commanded a highly mobile company of about sixty well-armed men, based in the impregnable fastness of Kintail, working amongst a sympathetic population and practising guerilla tactics. For example, in June 1720, hearing of a party of excisemen passing near Dingwall with a large consignment of whisky, he descended on them from the hills and relieved them of their burden.

The Commissioners made two serious attempts to exert their authority, both of which were frustrated by the lack of roads. The first was in September 1721. The Commissioners had appointed William Ross of Easter Fearn and Robert Ross, a bailie of Tain, as factors to the estates of Grant of Glenmoriston, Chisholm of Strathglass, and Seaforth. On 13 September, according to Chambers, they set off from Inverness with thirty soldiers and some armed servants of their own. They moved slowly up Glenmoriston and into Strathglass, holding courts, taking submissions and collecting rents. At Knockfin in upper Strathglass they were reinforced by fifty soldiers under a Lieutenant Brymer from the barracks in Glenelg, thus forming an invincible force of a hundred men.

Or so they thought. The first sign that all was not well was a bullet that whistled through a soldier’s hat as they advanced up Glen Affric. In fact Donald Murchison was waiting for them at a place called Àth nam Muileach with not only his usual sixty men but MacLeods and MacKenzies from Lewis under George MacKenzie of Kildun, Camerons from Lochaber, MacDonalds from Glengarry, and many of those very Grants and Chisholms who had been making a pretence of submission. All in all Murchison had as many as 350 men, armed with long Spanish firelocks and posted strategically along the route. To make matters worse for the Rosses, Brymer chose this moment — 8 a.m. on Monday 2 October 1721 — to peel off with his men. They were never heard of again.

Easter Fearn was riding bravely in front. Suddenly eight shots rattled out from a roughly-erected breastwork. He was wounded in two places but pretended to be unhurt. He called out a party of scouts to go

forward and clear the ground of ambushes. They went on for another six miles past Loch Affric, skirmishing all the way, till they reached Àth nam Muileach. As they toiled up the path in single file they took a volley from forty men hidden in the heather. Easter Fearn's son Walter was mortally wounded and Bailie Ross's son was hurt by a bullet which 'swept across his breast'. They returned fire as best they could, but bit by bit they became aware of more groups of Murchison's men on the hills around. Then they got word of a party of sixty more in their rear. They were surrounded.

Easter Fearn asked for a parley, and was confronted by Murchison. The result was that, in return for surrendering all his papers, signing his powers over to Murchison as factor to the Commissioners, and promising never to serve in that role again, Easter Fearn was granted safe conduct back to Strathglass.

Murchison's men guarded the party through the force of sixty lurking in their rear. "It was alleged afterwards," says Chambers, "that the commander was much blamed by his own people for letting the factors off with their lives and baggage, particularly by the Camerons, who had been five days at their post with hardly anything to eat; and Murchison only pacified them by sending them a good supply of meat and drink."

I have the distinct impression that these hungry Camerons were the sixty men in the Rosses' rear. Passing back through them must have been a tense business. The Cameron slogan is *A chlanna nan con, thigibh an-seo agus gheibh sibh feòil*. "Ye sons of the hounds, come here and get flesh."

According to a traditional account sent to Chambers by 'F Macdonald, Druidag Lodge, Lochalsh', Murchison lent "Captain Munro of Fearn" a few of his men to help him convey his mortally wounded son free of molestation as far as Knockfin. The Rosses reached home safely, but not before the young man had died in his litter. "Mr Macdonald ends," says Chambers, "by quoting two or three stanzas of a Gaelic poem composed by an old woman at Beaully, as they were passing with the dead body."

The Commissioners tried to learn from their mistake. The next attempt to root out the warriors of Kintail was handled by the military alone, and by the easier northerly route followed nowadays by the railway. In August next year 160 men of Col. Kirk's regiment under the command of a Captain MacNeil marched from Fort George by Dingwall, Strathgarve and Strathcarron, then turned south at the head of Loch Carron to enter Kintail by the pass of Mam Attadale.

Once again Murchison was waiting. He had placed an advance party of thirteen men under a relative, Kenneth Murchison, in the Coille Bhàn. MacNeil walked straight into it. One grenadier was killed and several soldiers, including MacNeil, were wounded. MacNeil pressed forward bravely, and the thirteen fell back, but when MacNeil got intelligence that a larger force lay ahead, he decided it was better to fall back in good order than risk the fate of the Rosses. One salvo of thirteen guns had repelled 160 *saighdearan ruadh*.

Donald Murchison had won, and well he knew it. Next year (1723), and again in 1725, he visited Edinburgh to remit money to Seaforth and mix with his old friends in the legal profession, yet not a hand was laid upon him. In 1725 the Forfeited Estates Commission was wound up; they concluded their report by saying that they had not sold the estate of William Earl of Seaforth, 'not having been able to obtain possession, and consequently to give the same to a purchaser'.

Seaforth obtained a personal pardon from King George, and came back in 1726. But Murchison had been too clever for his own good. He received little thanks from Seaforth, and died about 1737. 'F Macdonald' told Chambers: "He was offered only a small farm called Bundalloch, which pays at this day to Mr Matheson, the proprietor, no more than £60 a year; or another place opposite to Inverinate House, of about the same value. It is no wonder he refused these paltry offers. He shortly afterwards left this country [Kintail], and died in the prime of life near Conon." This is what 'Moladh Chabar Féidh' says about him:

*Tha cabar feàrna Dhòmhnail
Mar spòrs anns an talamh s' ac' —
Nach innseadh sibhse dhòmhs' e
'S gum b' eòl domh a charachadh?
'S chuirinn fios gu h-eòlach
Gu Seòras an caraideach
Gur h-e Fear Dhùn Dòmhnail
Le lòn chum an t-anam ris.
'Bhiast gun mheas gun mhiadh gun ghliocas
Riamh bu tric san talamh s' thu;
Dh'òl is dh'ith thu trian de d' phiseach,
S tu an t-isean amaideach!
Chuir na Rothaich thu air ghnothach,
S tu an t-amhasg aineolach!
'S ged thug Clann Choinnich miadh ort,
Cha b' fhiach thu 'n treas earrann dheth.*

("Donald's alder rafter / Is a joke in this land of theirs — / Wouldn't you Munros tell me so / So I'd know how to move it? / And I'd send good information / To George [MacKenzie of Kildun?] the relation / That the tacksman of Dundonnell / Fed him to keep him going. / You're the beast with the least respect, honour or wisdom / That's ever frequented this land; / A third of your increase you've drunk and you've eaten, / Aren't you the foolish chicken! / The Munros despatched you upon an errand, / Aren't you the ignorant blockhead! / And though the MacKenzies gave you respect / You weren't worth a third of it.")

There's a play of words here. *Cabar feàrna* is given by Dwelly: 'a rung or rafter of alder'. Alder makes poor timber, implying a weak rung in a ladder or a weak rafter in a house, hence an Achilles heel. But since the rest of the stanza appears to describe a homeless person, we can also take it literally. And some versions of

the poem have *cabar fearainn Dòmhnail*, another pun — ‘the pole of Donald’s land’ or ‘Ferindonald’s antlers’. Ferindonald is the Munro country.

The key to it all may be Murchison’s chivalrous behaviour at Àth nam Muileach, especially if everyone believed, as did F Macdonald, that his adversaries on that occasion were the hated Munros. Perhaps it reflects a view of him in line with Seaforth’s: that he had been bought by the Munros, that he enriched himself at the estate’s expense, and that his ultimate poverty was his own fault.

Positively my last word on ‘Moladh Chabar Féidh’ is this, then: given the subject-matter of this intriguing verse, Tormod Bàn’s version of the song must have been composed as late as the years 1726–37.

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