

Charlie's Year (9)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“THE Prince came up and successively took Glencairnaig and Major Evan in his arms, congratulating them upon the result of the fight. He then commanded the whole of the clan Gregor to be collected in the middle of the field; and a table being covered, he sat down with Glencairnaig and Major Evan to refresh himself, all the rest standing round as a guard, and each receiving a glass of wine and a little bread.”

I've picked this passage about the aftermath of the battle of Prestonpans, 21 September 1745, out of Robert Chambers's "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" to exemplify one of two things that we call "folklore". Chambers quotes it from a manuscript by a certain Duncan Macpharig (a MacGregor presumably) stated to have been "temporarily in the possession of the late Rev. Mr Macgregor, Stirling".

Imagine! Over four hundred dead, perhaps a thousand wounded, some horribly, many horses maimed, and we're invited to believe that a tablecloth is produced in the middle of the carnage and that the Prince sits down to enjoy a little light breakfast in the exclusive company of one of the regiments which had won him the battle.

No, I don't believe it, and I'm not aware that any other source corroborates it. It probably reflects a more scripted event on some other day, similar perhaps to one reported by the "Caledonian Mercury" of 28 October: "Saturday last, his royal highness the Prince reviewed the Macdonalds of Glengary, at Musselburgh; they made a most noble appearance."

It wouldn't surprise me to discover that Macpharig was nicknamed Donnchadh Sliabh a' Chlamhain because he never stopped talking about the battle even though he wasn't at it, just as a character in Angus Peter Campbell's splendid new novel "An Oidhche mus do Sheòl Sinn" is called Eòin Bhorodino because he never stopped talking about the Battle of Borodino even though he wasn't at it.

Now consider this, also about Charles, also from Chambers. "When at Perth he had been petitioned by a poor woman to *touch* her daughter, a child of seven years, who had been afflicted with the king's evil ever since her infancy. He excused himself by pleading want of time, but directed that the girl should be brought to him at Edinburgh; to which she was accordingly dispatched, under the care of a sick-nurse, and a day was appointed when she should be introduced to his presence in the palace.

"When the child was brought in, he was found in the picture-gallery, which served as his ordinary audience-chamber; surrounded by all his principal officers and by many ladies. He caused a circle to be cleared, within which the child was admitted, together with her attendant, and a priest in his canonicals. The patient was then stripped and placed upon her knees in the centre of the circle. The clergyman having pronounced an appropriate prayer, Charles approached the kneeling girl, and with great solemnity touched the sores, pronouncing at every different application, the words, 'I touch, but God heal!'

"The ceremony was concluded by another prayer from the priest; and the patient, being again dressed, was carried round the circle, and presented with little sums of money by all present. If the tale furnished to us be true, precisely twenty-one days from the date of her being submitted to Charles's touch, the ulcers closed and healed, and nothing remained to show that she had been afflicted, except the scars or marks left upon the skin! These marks our informant had himself touched."

King's-evil, as any dictionary will tell you, is a scrofulous disease supposed to be healed by the touch of a king. Scrofula is a form of tuberculosis which affects the lymphatic glands. Touching for king's-evil was regularly done by Charles's grandfather's brother, Charles II, and unlike Macphadrig's, I find this account credible in every detail. Of course a spin-machine was at work, but a scrofulous child was duly produced, there were plenty of witnesses (especially female) to disseminate the tale, and I'm happy to believe that the child

got better, maybe psychosomatically, maybe thanks to the things those gifts of money were able to buy.

Those then are the two main branches of folklore. First “oral narrative” – in this case, a yarn spun to make MacGregors feel good about themselves – then an example of “custom and belief”.

Charles spent the entire month of October at Holyrood before embarking on his next adventure. As Chambers was a historian of Edinburgh, and Mackenzie had no interest in that city, huge chunks of Chambers (1840) are omitted from “Eachdraidh a’ Phrionnsa” (1844) at this point. Mackenzie’s twin interests are religious affairs and the Highland army, which makes it all the more surprising that he left out our two bits of folklore.

Chambers tells us that not one of the “regular clergy” appeared in his pulpit on the first Sunday of the Jacobite occupation, because they had all deserted the town. Mackenzie adds explanations: they were afraid, he says, believing that the Prince was *de chreideimh an t-Shagairt* – a Catholic.

The Prince issues a proclamation which becomes curiously different in translation. Chambers: “No interruption shall be given to public worship, but on the contrary all protection to those concerned in it; and if, notwithstanding hereof, any shall be found neglecting their duty in that particular, let the blame lie entirely at their own door, as we are resolved to inflict no penalty that may possibly look like persecution.”

Extraordinarily, Mackenzie misunderstands “neglect of duty” as directed at congregations, not ministers. Translated back into English, his version reads: “The Prince asks the people of every confession and Creed to proceed to their various places of worship next Sunday, it gives him no pleasure or benefit for them to stay away. He also wishes it to be made known that that he did not take up his sword for religious persecution but for his own lawful temporal rights.”

The only Presbyterian to venture back into his pulpit during the occupation was the minister of the Gaelic church, Neil MacVicar. He prayed for King George as usual, says Chambers, and added: “As to this young person who has come among us seeking an earthly crown, do Thou, in thy merciful favour, grant him a heavenly one!”

Mackenzie translates this faithfully, and throws in, no doubt from having heard the tale himself: “Although many Highlanders were in church listening to this zealous minister, and although they understood well enough the meaning of what he said about Charles, they said not a word about it, and I fully believe that the Prince himself would not have done so either had he been listening.”

Neither author mentions the fuller version of the story, according to which MacVicar prayed: “Bless the king – thou knowest what king I mean. May the crown sit long and easy on his head. And for this man that is come amongst us to seek an earthly crown, we beseech thee in mercy to take him to thyself and give him a crown of glory.”

Mackenzie is deeply concerned with the reputation of the Highland army, because this had a continuing impact on the socio-economic condition of Gaelic speakers in the Lowlands, himself included, in his own day. Let me explain. Chambers says that Charles was obliged to publish another edict less creditable to his army. “It appears that, in searching for arms, the Highlanders used some license in regard to other matters of property; though it is also allowed that many persons, unconnected with the army, assumed the appearance of clansmen, and were the chief perpetrators of the felonies complained of. Whole bands, indeed, went about the country, showing forged commissions, and affecting to sell protections in Charles’s name.”

Chambers also points out that the Jacobites had released all prisoners from the jails and that no law-courts were operating. It reminds you of Baghdad under the Americans. In a footnote, he draws attention to a report in the “Caledonian Mercury” of 11 October about the arrest the previous night of a professional criminal called James “Daddy” Ratcliff. “He had

gone about the country since he last got out of jail, at the head of a gang of villains in Highland and Lowland dress, imposing upon and robbing honest people.”

Mackenzie uses these bits of information, and some of his own, to construct his case for the defence of the Gael. “They were ordered to search for arms throughout the city and surrounding countryside. This gave idle thieving rogues (*slaigh-tearan bradacha, diamhanach*) who lived in Edinburgh’s shadows the chance to practise their art with great advantage and safety – each one of these thieving ghouls (*na baobhan bradacha so*) made themselves Highland clothes, in order to resemble the army of the Gael, and started collecting tax from the country people in the Prince’s name.

“To as many as gave them money they gave written protections (*caoiteasan*) in the name of some of the Highland officers. From those who had no cash (*airgead-laimhe*) to give, they took a pennyworth (*luacha-peighinn*) of all the best they found in their possession. Sometimes they would take the butter and cheese, saying at the same time that the Prince had ordered them to deal in that way with everyone who had no ready money (*airgead-ullamh*).

“The behaviour of this rabble (*dol a mach na gràisge so*) earned Gaelic speakers ill-fame and resentment (*mi-chliù agus gamhlas*) throughout those districts that has lasted to the present day. I may add that as the Gael proceeded they were opening all prisons and setting the troublemakers and all other criminals (*a cuir nan ceannairceach agus gach luchd dò-bheairt eile*) at liberty, and these were the very people who were stealing and plundering in the name and disguise of Highlanders.”

The Prince’s political policies are of great interest. “He promised to respect the national debt,” says Chambers, “but said he could upon no account be induced to ratify the union.” However, the questions that get Mackenzie going are those that relate directly to the Highlands. Chambers says that the Government’s man there, Duncan Forbes of Culloden, was exerting himself to raise a loyal force “out of the *followings* of the Laird of Grant, the Earl of Sutherland, Monro of Foulis, and a few other well-affected landlords”.

Mackenzie puts it like this: “I may say that those who rose with him were not of the refuse (*diù*) of the clans (in time of danger), and I will name them here: the Campbells (*Duimhnich*), Sutherlands (*Cataich*), Munros, Grants, MacLeods, MacDonalds of Skye, and many others *air nach d’ fhuar mi ainm* – whose names I have not found.”

His use of *diù* is the figure of speech known as litotes, a very Gaelic thing. These clans were “no trash” in the way that Glasgow is “no mean city”. They were the kindreds who surrounded our author’s own people, the Gairloch Mackenzies, and our “translator” is anxious to deal with this issue even though Chambers doesn’t mention it at all.

Seaforth had come out for the Jacobites in ’15 and ’19 and lost a great deal in the process. Mackenzie says: “The laird of Culloden also got the Earl of Seaforth to try and raise the Kintailmen, the Lewismen and the rest of the Mackenzies in King George’s cause, and as he knew that none of them would come willingly (*air àilleas*) to go and help George, he sent word to Lewis and Kintail for them to muster at Brahan Castle on such and such a day to go and raid Fraser of Lovat (*a chum dol a thogail creach bho Mhac-Shimidh na h-Aird*), who was then on bad terms (*an droch rùin*) with Mackenzie.

“But when they reached the castle they were told that it was to help the King they were wanted (*a bhasa g’an iarraidh*). *Ciod an Rìgh?* says one man. ‘What King?’

“*Rìgh Seòras*, says Mackenzie. ‘King George.’

“They then unanimously declared that they had never heard tell of any king but the one rightful King (*an aon Rìgh dligheach*, footnoted *Rìgh Seumas athair a Phrionnsa* – ‘King James the Prince’s father’), and if they couldn’t get his permission to go and fight in his cause they would not go and shed their blood (*a dhortadh am fala*) in any stranger’s cause, ‘whether he be king or knight’ (*co dhiu a bhiod e na rìgh no na ridir*). Having thus stated their position, they returned home.”

Fact – or folklore?

November 2003