

Charlie's Year (37): east into Badenoch

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

FUNNY things, newspapers. In August 1746, when Prince Charles was in hiding near Achnacarry to the west of Loch Lochy, he was keen to cross the Great Glen and join Cameron of Lochiel and Cluny MacPherson, who were far to the east in Badenoch. However, Cameron of Clunes and the others who were looking after him saw it reliably reported in the newspapers that Charles had crossed eastwards over Corrieyairack with Lochiel and thirty men. That would draw the troops nicely away from Achnacarry, so for the time being it suited him to stay exactly where he was!

Eventually, however, the hunt turned back in his direction, and Charles had to be spirited off through the mountains around Loch Arkaig, travelling as always at night and resting during the day. Clunes's son reported that his father was waiting for them at a particular spot with provisions. Weak as he was with hunger, Charles was determined to keep the appointment. Toiling in the darkness amongst rocks and stumps of trees (felled for sale to iron-masters no doubt), Charles was as exhausted as he had ever been. Robert Chambers tells us in his "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" of 1840: "After proceeding some way farther, Charles had to acknowledge himself utterly incapable of further exertion; when the generous Highlanders took hold of his arms and supported him along, though themselves tottering under their unparalleled fatigue. Almost perishing with hunger, and sinking under the dreadful exertions of the night, they at last reached their destination; where, to their great relief, they found Clunes and his son, with a cow which they had killed and partly dressed."

In his "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844, which was supposed to be a translation of Chambers's work, John Mackenzie says nothing about that, but brings us swiftly back to the south side of Loch Arkaig, where Chambers simply says Charles was "conducted to a fastness" in Lochiel's fir-wood of Achnacarry: *rinn e-féin agus a Luchd-leanmhainn taigh falaich de bharrach nan crann ann an Giùbhsach Mhìc Dhòil'-Duibh*, says Mackenzie, "he and his companions built a hiding-place of birch timber in Lochiel's fir-wood". Here he got a message – a letter, says Mackenzie – from Lochiel and Cluny saying that the latter would come on a certain day and fetch him to Badenoch. At this point Mackenzie uses an interesting expression. Chambers says that as Charles was "impatient to see these dear friends", he set out immediately for Badenoch, hoping to meet Cluny on the way. Mackenzie: *Cho luath sa leugh am Prionns' an litir "cha d' rinn e lugha fir òrain," ach thog e air air ball agus thriall e do Bhàideanach, an dòchas tachairt ri Cluainidh air an rathad a tighinn*. What is this *lugha fir òrain* that seems to mean "patience"? Since Mackenzie puts it in quotation marks it must be a proverb or a line of a song. I think he means *luighe fir òrain*, which nowadays we'd spell *laighe fir òrain* – "a song-man's bedtime".

It can only refer to the practice of making songs in bed. Martin Martin wrote of how a classical Gaelic poet would compose his work while lying in a darkened room with a stone on his belly. Mackenzie himself has one or two things to say in his anthology "Sàr Obair" about making songs in bed. "It was a custom of the old highlanders, when they could not sleep, to sing on their beds," he says, "and that loud enough to waken all the inmates of the house, who, if the song was good, never grudged their slumbers being thus musically broken."

He tells how Niall MacMhuirich had been at the bardic schools in Ireland and brought home not only great learning but "a back-burden of the small-pox". John and Donald MacArthur came into the house and started tuning their pipes, whereupon Neil's swollen, pock-marked countenance rose like a ghost from the bed as he declaimed a vicious satire on the pipes beginning *Aodraman muice ho ho!* "A pig's bladder ho ho!" The two pipers fled in horror, and Neil's delighted father said: *Math thu fhéin, a mhìc, tha mi faicinn nach bu thuras caillt' a thug thu dh'Éirinn!* "Well done, son, I see it wasn't a wasted trip you made to Ireland!"

One more anecdote and the point is made, I think. The Rev. Allan Sinclair told how a Rannoch schoolmaster, Roderick Kennedy, used to visit the poet and evangelist Dugald Buchanan. They would sleep in the same room, and one night Buchanan, who was composing "An Claigeann" ("The Skull") at the time, said: "Are you asleep, Kennedy?"

"Why do you ask?" came the drowsy reply.

“Will I say *durragan donn* or *durragan crom*?”

Brown worms, crooked worms – he was obviously at the fourth verse of the forty-four, where he describes how worms made holes in the skull where the eyes had been. Kennedy replied: “Either, as you please.” Then on second thoughts he added: “*Durragan crom*.”

The great man got up, lit a candle, wrote for a while, then went back to bed, and the words *durragan crom* are in “An Claigeann” to this day. So *laighe fir òrain* seems to be a long lie, the thing Charles didn’t indulge in when he set off for Badenoch on 28 August 1746 without waiting for Cluny to arrive. Curiously, Mackenzie comes up almost immediately with another quotation. Chambers tells us that the area west of Loch Ericht “was destitute of wood”, and Mackenzie responds: *Tha’n t-àite sin de Bhàideanach “cho gann de choille is nach falaicheadh fiadh a chabar ann,” ach a dhaindeoin sin cha robh ionad falaich air tìr-mòr cho math ris, tha e làn chàrn, gharbhlach, a’s chòs.* (“That part of Badenoch is ‘so short of wood that no deer could hide his antlers in it’, but in spite of that there was no better hiding-place on the mainland, it is full of rock-piles, rough ground and hollows.”)

Too true. Lochiel and Cluny, who were first cousins (*’nan oghaichean*), had been living there, within a few miles of a military post at Shirramore, ever since Culloden. If you find that hard to believe, remember that, as you read this, Osama Bin Laden is somewhere in North-West Frontier Province, yet the Pakistani government can’t find him. Lochiel was lamed in both ankles at the battle, which was why Cluny had come to fetch Charles. And Charles missed him. The result was that when Charles approached the shieling bothy at Meall an Iubhair on 30 August with his companions, their arrival was unexpected, and no less than “twelve firelocks and some pistols” (*ceithir dagachan*, “four pistols”, says Mackenzie) were levelled at them through holes in the wall by the five men inside. Mackenzie milks the moment. *Cha b’ann gus an robh an t-iarunn-leigte ga tharrainn thuige a dh’aithnich Loch-Iall gu’m b’e am Prionns’ agus a chàirdean féin a bha tighinn!* “It wasn’t till he was in the very act of pulling the trigger that Lochiel realised it was the Prince and his own kinsfolk who were coming!”

Lochiel hobbled out and tried to kneel. Charles prevented him, pointing out that the act of homage would reveal his identity if someone were watching from the hill-tops. Mackenzie is more interested in telling us about Lochiel’s ample stocks of food and drink, however, for the hovel, “though small, was well furnished with viands and liquors” (Chambers); *bha e fada bho bhi na thalla dòlum* (Mackenzie). “It was far from being a parsimonious hall.”

Chambers gives the list. “Newly killed mutton, some cured beef sausages, plenty of butter and cheese, a large well-cured bacon ham, and an anker of whisky.” Mackenzie: *Bha gu leòir a staigh ann de mhuilt-fheoil ùir a’s shàilt, de dh’im, de chàise, de dh’aran agus do dh’uisge-beatha.* So the provisions have changed to fresh and salt mutton, butter, cheese, bread and whisky; the sausages and ham have disappeared, and bread has materialised. Other sources of information? No. Just an independent approach to the art of translation.

Quoting his source (Donald MacPherson, Cluny’s youngest brother), Chambers now tells us that the Prince “upon his entry, took a hearty dram, which he pretty often called for thereafter to drink his friends’ healths”. Mackenzie: *Cho luath sa rinn Tearlach suidhe dh’iarr e cuach a lionadh de dhriùchd Beinn-Altair, air dha sin fhaotainn dh’òl e air slàinte na cuideachda “bho bhalla gu balla.”* (“As soon as Charles had sat down he asked for a cup to be filled of the dew of Ben Alder; on receiving it he drank to the health of all present ‘from wall to wall’.”) Anyone who wonders where the coy expression “mountain dew” comes from can think about that. And what does he mean by “wall to wall”? That Charles made the rafters ring? Or that he didn’t know everyone’s names, but wanted to include them? Anyway, John Mackenzie has taught us a handy phrase to use in proposing a toast.

They were three days and nights at Meall an Iubhair, and Cluny found them there on the third day. The Prince said to him: “I’m sorry, Cluny, that you and your regiment were not at Culloden; I did not hear till lately that you were so near us that day.” Mackenzie translates this exactly. *B’oil leam a Chluainidh nach robh thu féin agus do chuid Pearsonach linn latha Chuil-Fhodair; ’s ann bho cheann ghoirid a chuala mi gu’n robh thu cho faisg oirnn an latha sin.*

His spelling *Cuil-Fhodair* is interesting. As Roddy MacLean points out in his splendid new book “The Gaelic Place Names and Heritage of Inverness”, just out at £5.99, Culloden started life as *Cùil Lodain*, “the nook of the small pool/marsh – “Puddle Neuk”, if you like. The dialect pronunciation *Cùil Lodn* seems to have led quickly to *Cùil Lodr*, which was

naturally misunderstood by Gaelic speakers from the west, like Mackenzie, as *Cùil Fhodair* – “Fodder Neuk”. You can get Roddy’s book from him at Culcabock Publishing, 13 Old Mill Lane, Inverness, IV2 3XP.

Charles and his companions soon moved further into the recesses of Ben Alder, to “a shieling called Uiskchilra” (Chambers), *gu achadh àiridh Uisge-chill-rath* (Mackenzie). Judging from Ordnance Survey evidence, the name is *Uisge a’ Chaolruighe* “the Water of the Narrow Shieling”. In this part of the Highlands *ruighe* “a slope” (as in *Port Ruighe*, Portree) was used of a shieling.

So Mackenzie’s place-name is worthless. But that’s very far from being the case with his description of Cluny’s Cage. This, the last and strangest of all his hiding-places, will help bring “Charlie’s Year” to an end in two weeks’ time.

10 December 2004