# The three King's Houses

## The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

In order to study the origins and earliest days of the Highland hotel industry, you have to think first of all of sources. In my last article I mentioned travellers' accounts in English, and stories and verse in Gaelic. I should probably add a fourth item: estate papers, including such things as letters addressed to or from inns, tacks or leases for the setting up of inns, and drovers' accounts detailing the cost of staying in inns, or perhaps of grazing cattle on land attached to such them.

Of particular interest I think would be the papers of the Jacobite chiefs forfeited in 1746, because their estates (or at least those parts of them which were not sold off) were run by civil servants for four decades on what were regarded as open and exemplary lines, and of course the establishment of inns was exactly the sort of thing to which priority was given. Good records were kept, and these have attracted some interest from scholars, so that we have publications like 'Statistics of the Annexed Estates 1755-1756' and Virginia Wills' 'Reports on the Annexed Estates 1755-1769', both produced by HMSO in 1973. Naturally it is published works like these that should be consulted first, before delving into the massive collections of papers in the Scottish Record Office.

A fifth type of source that occurs to me is Acts of Parliament, both before and after 1707. The 'Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland' were published long ago and are well indexed. I am not so familiar with the Acts of Westminster parliaments from 1707 on, but they are there, in print, to be trawled through, and of course for good economic reasons 1707 is probably the watershed date after which more and more inns began to be set up. I don't remember any mention of inns at all by Martin Martin, who described the Islands in quite some detail in his remarkable 'Description of the Western Islands of Scotland circa 1695', first published in 1703. There is a conference devoted to Martin Martin in Sabhal Mór Ostaig on the publication day of this article, Friday 8 November, so no doubt if I am wrong, somebody will be quick to tell me. If I am right, it is a fact well worth noting.

In particular, there was a type of inn called the 'King's House' or *Taigh an Rìgh*, which I can only assume, in my ignorance, is a name given to inns established by Act of Parliament. In at least two cases the name has stuck to this day. There was the King's House of Glencoe, the Kingshouse of today, at the edge of Rannoch Moor where the Military Road strikes off up the Devil's Staircase to Kinlochleven. There was the King's House of Balquhidder at Strathyre, again still trading under that name. And there was the King's House at Letterfinlay in Appin known as *Taigh-an-Rìgh Lùb nam Mart*, the King's House of Luib of the Cows, which gives a good indication of the reason for its importance. The

supply of Highland beef was, I believe, crucial to the British army and navy in the eighteenth century, and helped fuel the industrial revolution in the nineteenth.

I know a little about the origins of the King's House of Balquhidder. It was built by the Forfeited Estates Commissioners in 1747 for the benefit of drovers coming over the hill from Lochearnhead and the north on their way to the trysts at Crieff and at Falkirk. As a result, the annual fair of the Balquhidder people, the *Féill Aonghais*, moved from its ancient site in the glen at *Tom Aonghais* (where St Angus himself was said to have preached) to the King's House, and became known, at least to strangers, as *Faidhir Taigh an Rìgh*. The *Féill Aonghais* had always been held on 11 August, but when the calendar was changed by Act of Parliament in 1752, it moved forward in the year to the new 11 August — ten days earlier than the old one — as befitted a well-run event on one of His Majesty's Annexed Estates.

I am not sure when the King's House of Glencoe was established. You will find Kingshouse mentioned in books about the Massacre (1692), but I have the feeling that is an anachronism. Donaldson and Morpeth's 'Dictionary of Scottish History' defines 'King's House' as 'Places in Glencoe, Balquhidder and Letterfinlay, said to be named from their use as bases by Marshal Wade when he was making his roads', and Wade was building his roads from 1725 to 1738.

Speaking of Kingshouse of Glencoe in his 'Drove Roads of Scotland', A R B Haldane wrote: "Here the need for an inn and the lack of incentive to keep one was early recognised by the Government, and travellers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries record that the innkeeper sat rent free and had an annual Government grant." It is of course in a hostile, depressing, God-forsaken sort of location, and there is a litany of travellers' complaints about it. Captain Thomas Newte, in his 'Tour of England and Scotland in 1785', describes it as having 'not a bed fit for a decent person to sleep in nor any provisions but what are absolutely necessary for the family'. In a letter in the Breadalbane Papers, James Donaldson, Surveyor of the Military Roads, says in 1802 that it 'has more the appearance of a hog stye than an Inn'.

It was, however, Dorothy Wordsworth, travelling the following year by pony and trap with her brother William the poet, that left us the classic description of the King's House of Glencoe. It is one of the highlights — or should I say lowlights? — of her book 'Recollections of a Tour made in Scotland'.

The house looked respectable from a distance, she said, having a roof of blue slates. (These were from Ballachulish no doubt, and there is abundant evidence in James Hogg's tour of the same year that Highland inns stood out by reason of their slate roofs.) But the ground around it looked blighted — scarcely any grass or even heather, no enclosure for a cow, just a small plot containing some dwarfish potatoes 'which had, no doubt, been raised by means of the dung left by travellers' horses'.

"The first thing we saw on entering the door," she writes, "was two sheep hung up, as if just killed from the barren moor, their bones hardly sheathed in flesh. After we had waited

a few minutes, looking about for a guide to lead us into some corner of the house, a woman, seemingly about forty years old, came to us in a great bustle, screaming in Erse, with the most horrible guinea-hen or peacock voice I ever heard, first to one person, then another. She could hardly spare time to show us up-stairs, for crowds of men were in the house — drovers, carriers, horsemen, travellers, all of whom she had to provide with supper, and she was, as she told us, the only woman there.

"Never did I see such a miserable, such a wretched place — long rooms with ranges of beds, no other furniture except benches, or perhaps one or two crazy chairs, the floors far dirtier than an ordinary house could be if it were never washed . . . We sat shivering in one of the large rooms for three quarters of an hour before the woman could find time to speak to us again; she then promised a fire in another room, after two travellers, who were going a stage further, had finished their whisky, and said we should have supper as soon as possible.

"She had no eggs, no milk, no potatoes, no loaf-bread, or we should have preferred tea. With length of time the fire was kindled, and after another hour's waiting, supper came — a shoulder of mutton so hard that it was impossible to chew the little flesh that might be scraped off the bones, and some sorry soup made of barley and water, for it had no other taste.

"After supper, the woman, having first asked if we slept on blankets, brought in two pair of sheets, which she begged that I would air by the fire, for they would be dirtied below-stairs. I was very willing, but behold! The sheets were so wet, that it would have been at least a two-hours' job before a far better fire than could be mustered at King's House — for, that nothing might be wanting to make it a place of complete starvation, the peats were not dry, and if they had not been helped out by decayed wood dug out of the earth along with them, we should have had no fire at all.

"The woman was civil, in her fierce, wild way. She and the house, upon that desolate and extensive Wild, and everything we saw, made us think of one of those places of rendezvous which we read of in novels — Ferdinand Count Fathom, or Gil Blas — where there is one woman to receive the booty, and prepare the supper at night. She told us that she was only a servant, but that she had now lived there five years, and that, when but a 'young lassie', she had lived there also. We asked her if she had always served the same master, 'Nay, nay, many masters, for they were always changing.' I verily believe that the woman was attached to the place like a cat to the empty house when the family who brought her up are gone to live elsewhere." It is clear that this remarkable woman was also able to speak English.

Dorothy and William found (like Captain Burt, as I showed last time) that their beds were better than expected, and got a good night's sleep. Breakfast was a problem, however. "I asked if it was possible to have a couple of eggs boiled before our departure: the woman hesitated; she thought I might, and sent a boy into the out-houses to look about, who brought in one egg after long searching."

The couple's horse had fared little better. There were no stalls in the stable, no hay, so no bedding. "William was obliged to watch the horse while it was feeding, for there were several others in the stable, all standing like wild beasts, ready to devour each other's portion of corn."

The third King's House was *Taigh-an-Rìgh Lùb nam Mart* in Appin. It was certainly there by 1752, when the innkeeper, Angus Mackintosh, was suspected of knowing something about the Appin Murder. Captain Alexander Campbell wrote on 25 May: "I have order'd the man on Lapenamart and his maid to be brought here, and am in hopes of making some discoveries from them as I am credibly inform'd there is a great connection betwixt him and Breck and the whole Damned Race: I am certain we have the principal actors in custody." Elsewhere in letters of those days it was called Tynluib.

I will finish with a tale of *Taigh-an-Rìgh Lùb nam Mart* which is very, very different from any of the foregoing, because it comes from Gaelic traditon. One Saturday night, we are told, a group of young men were drinking and playing cards for money there. Heated by drink and ill luck, one of them began to curse terribly. No doubt remembering the reputation of cards as 'the Devil's Books', one man took fright and stopped playing, but the swearer boasted that he would keep playing even if the Enemy of Mankind himself should join in. Soon afterwards a swarthy individual stepped into the room and asked if he could play. They agreed, and he drew in a chair.

When the innkeeper came in, however, he noticed under the table that the stranger had hooves. He came back with a big bowl of water and a bible, and said, *Tha mi fhéin a'smaoineachadh, a chlann, nach bu mhisd sibh a bhith air bhur baisteadh*. 'I think, lads, that it would do you no harm to be baptised.' And he began sprinkling them with water in the name of the Trinity.

At the mention of the holy names, the stranger disappeared in blue flames through the wall. And as proof of what had happened, it used to be pointed out that the part of the wall of *Taigh-an-Rìgh Lùb nam Mart* through which the Devil had passed could never be made watertight again.