Charlie's Year (15): What if . . . ?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

THE fatal council of war in Derby in which it was decided that the Jacobite army should turn around and go back to Scotland took place on Thursday 5 December 1745. "Had that army gone on," says Robert Chambers in his "History of the Rebellion of 1745–6" (1840), "the French invasion would have taken place in time to support Charles in London, supposing that he had seized the government; and the Stuart dynasty must have been reinstated on the throne."

The same point was made by John Mackenzie in his "Eachdraidh a' Phrionnsa" of 1844, which was supposed to be a translation of Chambers's work: *N'an robh na Gàëil air gabhail air an aghaidh bha 'n fheachd Fhràngach, trà gu leòir ann an Lunnainn gu còmhnadh leo; agus a réir gach coltais bhiodh sliochd nan rìghrean dùthasach air an cur an dàil an còrach le ro bheag spàirne.* "Had the Gael gone on, the French force would have been in London in time to help them; and in all likelihood the native race of kings would have been reinstated with little effort."

Ah, intelligence, intelligence. We know now that Saddam had no WMDs. It didn't feel like that a year ago. And this in an era of instant communication!

Spare a thought, then, for Prince Charles's officers. They knew what was north of them, because that was the way they had come. They knew, as Lord George Murray pointed out, "that they were about to be environed by three armies, amounting collectively to about 30,000 men, while their own forces were not above 5,000". What may not have been quite so clear was that they had got past two of these armies, and that the third, at Finchley, "was not formidable in character or numbers, and probably might have failed to meet the clans in battle, if they had marched still onward".

Other facts, being over the horizon, were still less clear: the Government was in panic; King George was preparing to leave; the Welsh were rising; leading English Jacobites, who seemed to see the Highland army as more political rally than military force, were ready to voice their support; the French fleet carrying 10,000 troops was ready to set sail. All that was required was that the inspirational march should continue, which is what the troops – and Charles himself – wanted to do.

It's a moment frozen in history, in more ways than one. When I was a student at Glasgow University in the 60s I wrote a dissertation on the poems of William Ross, who lived from 1762 to 1791 or thereabouts. Like John Mackenzie, he was a Gairloch man (although Skye likes to claim him too, as he was born there). In a song which he composed in 1782 to celebrate the repeal of the act against the Highland dress there's a line about *meirgh' air leirg nan Lunnainneach*, "a banner on the Londoners' road", which has reverberated in my head ever since. I found the verse in which it occurs (the last) particularly difficult to understand, in fact I called it "this foggy passage", so it seems a good idea to revisit it now.

On fhuair sinn fasan le'r sàr chleachdadh,
Dùisgeadh beachd ar sinnsear
Le rùn gun cheilg sa h-uile fear
'S gun mheirgh' air leirg nan Lunnainneach,
Le sunnd is gleus is barrachd spéis
Toirt 'àite féin don Rìgh —
Mo bhàs gun éis mur b' fheàrr leam féin sin
Na ged éibhte 'n t-sìth.

In my dissertation I interpreted it like this: "Since we have got our splendid tradition back in fashion, let our forebears' purpose awaken – to give the (Stuart) king (i.e. Charles Edward)

his own (rightful) place with joy, good cheer and great respect, with genuine love in everybody and with no (Hanoverian) banner on (i.e. blocking) the road to London. My death without delay should I not prefer that (purpose) to a declaration of peace (i.e. an abdication of the Stuart claim. The exiled Stuarts considered themselves technically as Kings of Great Britain at war with the Electors of Hanover.)"

For the word "blocking" I provided this footnote: "In December, 1745, the Jacobite army was obliged to retreat from Derby because the road to London was completely blocked by Cumberland's army at Coventry, Stafford and Lichfield."

I was wrong. It's not true to say that the road to London was blocked. Draw a line through Coventry, Stafford and Lichfield and it runs parallel to the A1, not across it. In any case, as I knew well, John Mackenzie himself had helped us out with a note on the poem which he published in "Sàr Obair" of 1841. He said: "Our author, like all other poets of his day and country, was a staunch Jacobite, while his father was equally firm in his adherence to the family of Hanover. William had composed the song during one of his excursions through the country, where he probably heard of the erasure of the obnoxious act from the Statute Book, and sung it for the first time to a happy group of rustics who were in the habit of congregating nightly at his father's ingle to hear his new compositions.

"When he came to the last stanza, in which he indirectly lampoons his Majesty, 'Ah!' said his father, involuntarily laying his hand on a cudgel, 'ye clown, you know where and when you sing that.'

"'Really, father,' replied the poet, 'I would sing it in the House of Commons if *you* were not there!'"

Looking at the verse again, and giving full weight this time to Mackenzie's anecdote, I think I'd interpret it more straightforwardly: "Since our excellent habit's back in fashion / Let our ancestors' view awaken / With selfless resolve in every man / And no banner on the road to London, / With joy and good cheer and much more esteem / Giving the King his own place – / May I die right away if I wouldn't prefer that / To any declaration of peace."

I now think that the line "And no banner on the road to London" is crucial to our understanding of the poet's thinking. In 1782 this idealistic, forward-looking young man believed that the era in which political aims were achieved by military means was over. The "Disclothing Act" had been peacefully repealed; next in his sights was the Act of Succession. It was still the eighteenth century, however, and the one thing that was beyond his imagination was the idea of walking peacefully down the road to London bearing political banners high, as the Jarrow marchers did in 1936. That's why I couldn't understand him in the 1960s.

So what if the Highland army *had* continued on their way? As far as I can make out, modern historians are as willing as Chambers and Mackenzie to concede that they had a fair chance of succeeding. Let's consider what might have happened.

The two most likely scenarios are military defeat and political victory. Military defeat could have come about if the army at Finchley, properly commanded, had marched north and forced the Jacobites to face Cumberland's dragoons. The result, presumably, would have been a massacre, but the effect at home might not have been quite so great as in the aftermath of Culloden, when the presence of English troops in the heart of the Highlands led to atrocities against the civilian population. The wiser counsels of the civilian authorities in Scotland might have prevailed; the massacre of St Albans, Bletchley Heath or whatever would provide the Government with the blood-sacrifice which it sought; retribution in the form of the Disarming and Disclothing Acts might have been avoided, but otherwise the course of events would have been no different.

And political victory? James VIII and III would have taken the throne, and Charles III would have succeeded him in 1766. In the short term there would be friendship with France, but the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars would have happened just the same, as would the conquest of India, American independence and the Industrial Revolution. There

would have been no more Georges and no Queen Victoria, however, so Georgian terraces and Victorian values would be called something else.

Since the Jacobite party stood for religious toleration and devolution, and the contribution of Gaelic-speaking Highlanders and their leaders to the Christmas Revolution of 1745 would have to be acknowledged, the greatest effects would have been in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In Ireland, King James would have obliged his Dublin parliament to repeal the Penal Laws against Catholics; there would have been no rebellion in 1798; Irish would probably have continued to be the language of the majority of the people; the famine of the 1840s, which was wholly avoidable, would certainly not have taken place, thus reducing Irish influence on modern America and Australia; the Dublin parliament (which was in fact abolished in 1800) would have survived; Ireland would today be in the same relationship to the Crown as Scotland and Wales; there would be no IRA, no Northern Ireland.

Here, the Scottish Parliament would have been restored not in 1999 but in 1746; there would have been no reprisals against anyone; tartan would never have been banned; the celebration of all things Highland would have begun not as kitsch in 1822 but as the genuine article in 1746, and the Gaelic language would have been integrated into the fabric of the nation; the worst of the Clearances would have been avoided, certainly not for lack of domineering landlords, but because an independent Scotland would have had less access to the growing British – or English – Empire, and would have been forced, Scandinavian-style, to plough its own economic furrow. Oh, and the Scottish impact on Canada would have been much less.

With access to fewer markets, would Scotland have been a poorer country, with no great industrial conurbations? With independent parliaments under the same crown in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, perhaps even Cardiff, would a federal constitution have evolved, offering equal access to Empire but with protection for state economies? Would the restored Stuart kings have grown too big for their boots and left us with republics? Or one big federal republic?

There are some answers, leading to more questions. On Thursday 5 December 1745 a Highland army held all our futures in its hands. But since its senior officers – certainly not Charles, certainly not the men – decided on retreat, it will only ever be: “What if . . . ?”

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