

Gaelic Descriptions of the Battle of Harlaw

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The Harlaw plateau and the monument to the battle, as seen from the west

EDITOR'S NOTE: Perhaps no Scottish battle has created so much controversy as the Battle of Red Harlaw, which took place in July 1411. Dr. Ian Olson joins us for the first time from Aberdeen, Scotland, to discuss the known Gaelic versions of the battle's history. We are pleased to have his experience in Scottish ethnology to help us better understand this watershed event in Scotland's history.

A number of problems arise when considering the 'atrocious' battle on the plateau of Harlaw which brought to a bloody halt an invasion of the Scottish mainland in the summer of 1411 – an invasion by sea and by land of a huge, battle-hardened army, commanded by Donald, second Lord of the Isles, ostensibly to gain the Earldom of Ross and the Lordship of Skye – a gamble thwarted by a government army led by the Earl of Mar.

The Missing Records

The first problem is that apart from formal

charters, there are no surviving written records of the Lordship, as a later writer was to regret bitterly in his 1912 *Catalogue of Gaelic Manuscripts in the Advocates' Library and Elsewhere in Scotland*. Donald Mackinnon, in an appendix headed "Gaelic MSS. Lost or Missing", wrote:

"During the administration of the Lords of the Isles, records seem to have been pretty regularly kept. This department, we are told, was in charge of MacDuffie or McPhee of Colonsay. These would, in part, be written in Gaelic. The disappearance of these records is a great loss not merely to the history of the West Highlands but to the history of Scotland."

The Lordship of the Isles was eventually forfeited in 1493, and the powers of its last Lord removed. This resulted in a state of complete anarchy, setting in train clan conflicts, a process which appears to have resulted not only in the loss of the records of the Lordship's administration, but also the greater part of the ancient Gaelic literature.

The Contemporary Accounts of the Invasion

Thus contemporary or near-contemporary accounts of the conflict are provided mainly by surviving Lowland mediaeval chronicles, written in Latin. [A language, incidentally, that Donald would most likely have used. Richard II even offered him a six year safe conduct to attend Oxford, but records do not show that he took it up – not surprisingly, as he was at the time fully occupied as de facto Lord of the Isles.].

There is only one contemporary Gaelic account. Written in the Irish *Annals of Loch Cé: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 1014 to A.D. 1590*, it stated firmly that in 1411 there was:

“A great victory by Mac Dhomhail of Alba over the Foreigners of Alba; and MacGilla-Eoin [Maclean] of Mac Dhomhail’s people was slain in the counterwounding of that victory.”

This is an interesting certainty of victory, for the Latin chroniclers were absolutely sure of one thing – the outcome of a hideous, day-long sloggish match, that left some 3,000 dead and dying in the Harlaw fields, was “uncertain.” As a much later Scots ballad was to agree:

“ye could scare tell wha had won”.

The Irish Connection

An Irish connection was doubly important in this case. The Lowland chroniclers all agreed that Donald invaded with “10,000” troops, though doubt has been cast in the past about this extraordinary size. But Clan Donald had much earlier “seeded” itself into Antrim, and for the Lordship of the Isles, this not only served as a useful place of refuge but as an outlet for the surplus military potential of the Lordship.

Many of these mercenaries, termed *gallóglagh* or gallowglasses by the Irish, had settled as a more or less permanent military caste in Ireland before 1400, but the annals show a constant traffic across the North Channel thereafter.

As a result of this, the Lords of the Isles had an enormous potential reservoir of experienced fighting men on which to draw. This may explain, in part at least, their ability to put on the field armies which, in terms of numbers and expertise, often matched those at the command of the Crown itself, which makes it highly believable that as many as 10,000 men did accompany Donald to Harlaw.

These corps of mail-clad, battleaxe-wielding, heavy infantry were formidable, all fighting on foot regardless of rank, and notorious for being especially effective against mounted opponents. Donald’s army consisted of no assembly of lightly-armed Islanders – it was, instead, both formidable and battle-hardened. In other words he had invaded with a highly dangerous and virtually unstoppable force, but a force with major, problematic requirements for supply and reward, a force, furthermore, which had to achieve results before the harvest called its men home.

There are later accounts that the army was first assembled at Ardtornish in Morvern before sailing to Strome. With ships and galleys capable of holding between 300 and 50 men, some 100 sails would have embarked there to march on Dingwall, seize its castle and occupy Ross. How Donald’s army then ravaged its way across and down through the Garioch until blocked at Harlaw, some fourteen miles from the international port of Aberdeen, a rich city whose sacking would reward his troops, is another story.

It is worth pointing out at this stage that there are no contemporary accounts of the composition, armament or experience of Mar’s government army. Despite the romantic imagining of the likes of Walter Scott and his followers that it consisted of an outnumbered force of well-armed shining knights, “better armed and disciplined”, “with their banners and penoncelles waving”, “with levelled spears, and ponderous maces and battleaxes”, there are in fact *none*.

The Much Later Accounts

The second even greater problem in dealing with the battle of Harlaw is that there is a gap of some 300 and more years before a much later set of accounts begin to appear from either side.

On the Lowland side, the mediaeval chroniclers had described it as chaos. Due to Mar's incompetence, troops were flung in disorder as they arrived, with unnecessary loss of life, into an "atrocious" shambles. With one exception, (Irvine of Drum) the leaders had been nobles from "beyond the Tay." But the very much later Lowland writers recounted enthusiastically the opposite, an organized, well-dressed and ordered force, led this time by the nobles of North-East Scotland.

The Red and Black Books of Clanranald

Although the Gaels were eventually given a somewhat variable account of the battle in the late seventeenth century by the "Sleat historian," (most likely an amateur historian, a Captain Uisdean MacDonald from North Uist), this was in English. It was not until the early eighteenth century for the only prose descriptions of the Battle of Harlaw in Scottish Gaelic to appear, in the *Red and Black Books of Clanranald*. As already mentioned, after the Lordship of the Isles was forfeited in 1493 and its territory dismembered, there was a deliberate and thorough destruction of its physical and cultural heritage. But although the *Books* were written after the Lordship was long gone, they were part of a literary tradition begun centuries earlier, and contained material which was certainly composed and written down well within the period of the Lordship.

The Red and Black Books – neither are actual books – consist of manuscripts written on paper by the professional poets and historians to the old Highland nobility who composed them in a literary dialect known as "Classical Gaelic."

Most importantly, they contain a "History of Clan Donald," which includes Donald's actions at Harlaw. *The Red Book of Clanranald*

was compiled by Niall MacMhuirich of South Uist, a member of the family that had provided poets and chroniclers to the Clan Donald and Clanranald chiefs. The *Black Book* has a number of authors, in particular Christopher Beaton, Gille Críost Mac Bheathadh, a member of a Gaelic learned family who made the *Black Book* as a copy of the *Red Book* for his own use.

Both sets of manuscripts, MCR39 and MCR40, are currently held by the National Museum of Scotland; there are no copies of either in the National Library.

There is also considerable doubt as to whether the "*Red Book*" is in fact the original *Red Book* – the *Leabhar Dearg* of Clanranald which was said to have been lent to James Macpherson for the Ossianic poems it held. The *Red Book* manuscripts held by the National Museum have thus been described alternatively as the "*Little Book*." Although the original was said to have been returned to Clanranald, it was also claimed to have been taken thereafter by emigrants to Australia, where in the 1930s a woman said she owned this book – but unfortunately could not be persuaded to show it to scholars.

The Mistranslation

A Reverend Donald Macintosh made a transcript and English translation of the historical portions of the *Red Book* which was used by various writers such as Walter Scott, but the best known transcriptions and translations of the *Black* and *Red Books* appear in the second volume of the 1894 *Reliquiae Celticae*, a collection of "texts, papers and studies in Gaelic literature and philology" initiated by the Reverend Alexander Cameron and edited after his death by Alexander MacBain and John Kennedy.

The only reference in this edition to Donald of Isla at the battle of Harlaw in the *Black Book* contains the phrase:

"Do bhrisd se cath gaifech ar Dhiúc Murchadh."

This was translated only as, "He fought

the battle of Garioch or Harlaw against Duke Murdoch.”

Leaving aside the error that the duke was not Murdoch, but of Albany, this translation was worrying, for it gave no expression to *bhrisd* – a reference to “breaking,” and it should really be rendered as “He broke – i.e. won - the battle of Garioch over Duke Murdoch,” a no small change in history. Furthermore, the Gaelic in the *Red Book* reads:

“*Do brisd se cath Gaifech cairfech ar diuc Murchadh . . .*”

Again, this would literally be, “He broke the battle of Garioch against Duke Murdoch,” but the scribe has also qualified the battle as “*cairfech*.” This will be the Irish Gaelic adjective *gáibhtheach*, with its meanings of “dangerous, terrible, fierce, eager, exaggerating, costly, distressed, pitiful, plaintive.” (It survives in Modern Irish as *gáifeach*).

In other words, this comes close to describing the battle as a Pyrrhic victory, and offers a number of possible outcomes for Donald:

- “He won the costly Battle of Harlaw against Duke Murdoch.”
- “He won a Pyrrhic victory over Duke Murdoch at the Battle of Harlaw.”
- “He won the fiercely fought/terrible Battle of Harlaw against Duke Murdoch.”

These versions are a long way from claiming that Donald merely “fought” the Battle of Harlaw, and they confirm the opinions of the Sleat historian and of Macdonald historians in general, that he did indeed have a victory there, although at a terrible cost. Nevertheless, they have remained mistranslated until now, the *Reliquiae Celticae* version even being used by a Gaelic speaker when addressing the unveiling of the monument to the battle on the field of Harlaw in 1914.

Thus, the two Gaelic accounts of the battle claim that Donald was the victor at Harlaw, although the *Red Book* warned that the victory was most likely “Pyrrhic” – gained as a result of terrible loss.



The Red Book of Clanranald

The actual outcome was, however, both complex and tragic – neither the Lordship of the Isles nor the earldom of Mar were to survive the century - with reality eventually becoming obscured by myths.

In 1896, in their monumental, three-volume history *The Clan Donald*, the authors, the Reverends Macdonalds, in the end warned us:

“Trustworthy accounts of this famous fight there are none. Lowland historian and ballad composer, as well as Highland seanachie, described what they believed must and should have happened.”

The Lowland historian of the Irvine of Drum family went even further in 1998:

“Much has been written about that battle, and some of it is pure fiction.”

Sources: From my previous accounts of the battle:

Bludie Harlaw. Realities, Myths, Ballads (Edinburgh, John Donald, 2014). Hardback. 192 pp. ISBN: 9781906566760

“The Battle of Harlaw, its Lowland Histories and their Balladry: Historical confirmation or confabulation?,” *Review of Scottish Culture*, 24, (2012), 1- 33.

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