The Tower and the Stone

In search of the exact location of the Raising of the Jacobite Standard at Glenfinnan

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A heather fire that broke out on the west slope of Glenfinnan in July of 1988 turned the famous historical site's history on its head. After local historian Iain Thornber helped clear the burnt heather and lichen from a flat boulder, he discovered an inscription in the stone surface. It was in Latin and translated into English it read:

"MDCCXLV. IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, THE STANDARD OF CHARLES EDWARD STUART WAS SET UP IN 1745, TRIUMPHANT AT LAST.

There were three pairs of footsteps carved out, a crown and a cross, and the names CAMERON 827, HUGH and TRDINE, probably for the amount of Lochiel Cameron's men, Bishop Hugh MacDonald and the Marquess of Tullibardine (the Duke of Atholl) respectively, who were also present at the royal ceremony. There was an arrow and the number 4, presumably for four steps to reach the exact spot on the rock where the standard had stood when it was raised. Thornber took some
photographs of the rock. He contacted the press and soon his new theory reopened the debate about the Raising of the Stuart Standard.

It wasn’t the first time the accuracy of the Glenfinnan Monument as the site of the raising of the standard had been cast in doubt. Since the nineteen fifties historians had questioned whether the monument was in the right place. Some of them pointed out that its location did not fit with eyewitness accounts and contemporary records. They had pointed at the hillside of Torr á Choit, behind the present National Trust for Scotland visitor centre, as the spot where the standard had actually been raised. And now a second hillside, on the other side of the river Finnan and across the A830 from St. Mary and St. Finnan RC church, challenged the famous monument’s truth.

But the NTS, keeper of the monumental and very lucrative tourist attraction on the beach of the beautiful loch, fought back. 'My father and brother have been herding sheep on that hill for thirty years and they never saw any inscriptions,' the visitor centre’s manager told the newspapers. It was a clever move, despite the fact that during those years the inscribed slab of rock would have been heavily overgrown with liken and such, and therefore it would have been impossible to see the writing even if you knew it was there, let alone if you didn’t. But the point was made. Unless the reliability of the inscriptions could be proven beyond doubt, the NTS’s prize possession would be relatively safe from the scathing attacks it had suffered.

And it has been safe. Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit the Prince Charles Monument and the nearby 'Harry Potter Viaduct' every year. No one ever takes the trouble of going to see the inscribed rock. So maybe it is time to stir matters up a bit.

Okay, so let’s talk about the weather. Could the raising of the standard have taken place where the NTS claims it did? Stats kept by meteorologists show the weather in the year 1745 had been very wet throughout the United Kingdom. In the Stuart Papers, a collection of letters concerning the Jacobite movement kept in Windsor Castle, there is a letter from the Irish Abbe James Butler of Nantes, who was chaplain to Prince Charles during the voyage to Scotland, to his father or uncle the Duke of Ormond. He returned to France just before the raising of the standard at Glenfinnan.

"...The affairs have a very promising look, and numbers crowding daily to offer themselves. They complain they have no man of note but the Prince to head them which greatly dispirits them. Provisions were also very scant, the moisture of the year having occasioned a very late harvest. But God seems to favour them in all things, for the very day we parted we met three English ships loaded with oatmeal, amounting in all to about 400 tons. We took them as prizes and despatched them to the Prince which will sufficiently supply for some time."

Late harvests are usually the result of too much rainfall and flooded land. The head of Loch Shiel can get pretty boggy in a wet year. There are three rivers contributing to the loch at the Glenfinnan end, and they are not mere mountain streams. Rivers Slatach, Finnan and Callop, all within mere hundreds of meters of distance, are at
least eight to fifteen meters wide and a bit wider at the mouth. Loch Shiel has the reputation of being the Highland's second most flooded freshwater loch after Loch Awe. The water level can vary up to two meters during bad weather and the monument and surrounding land has been flooded often in the past.

According to Christopher Duffy's The '45 (2003), the winter of 1744-45 was one of the coldest of the century, with severe frost lasting into March. Lord George Murray is quoted writing about the conditions in the Highlands that many tacksmen gave up farming and enlisted in the British army because of the severe poverty, while cattle all through the Highlands were threatened with extinction because of the frost.

Then in April heavy rainfall took over from the frost. Duffy is an internationally renowned expert in military history and for the first time in books about the Jacobite Rebellion he incorporates the weather and geological details in his narrative as if he was a general just before battle. He has researched many sources, like civilian diaries, remarks made by officers of the land services and the Royal Navy ship's logs and many others, to come up with a clear description of the weather during the campaign. His final judgment on the monument site as the spot of the Raising of the Standard is rather definitive. 'It can be ruled out altogether for it was much too boggy.'

The general bogginess of the Glenfinnan valley floor has even caused the little township of Garbole, on River Finnan a few hundred meters from the loch, to be abandoned. This is made plain in the result of an archeological survey made in the area:

"A walkover survey in March 2000 by Wordsworth Archaeological Services at Torr a' Choit, Glenfinnan, identified remains that could possibly be associated with the site of Garbole township, depicted on Roy's map of c1750. The map shows four structures and associated arable fields. No structures are now visible although remnant rigs (narrow strips of cultivated ground, KS) can still be seen. The area is under modern fields and was semi-waterlogged at the time of the visit. It seems
likely that occupation in the area would have been abandoned in favor of drier ground...

So there were two townships at the head of Loch Shiel, Garbole only slightly smaller than Slatach. The latter is called 'Taynaslatich' on the map, perhaps erroneously from 'Tigh na Slatach' meaning House by the River Slatach. Since the map is from the 1750’s the house from the township's name could have been the first incarnation of the present Glenfinnan House Hotel, which stands close to the site of the former township Slatach. It was built as an inn by Alexander MacDonald 7th Glenaladale, Prince Charles' friend and protector during his Scottish adventure, between 1752 and '55. It didn't exist at the time of the Raising of the Jacobite Standard.

On the 18th of August 1745 Prince Charles left the safety of the fiercely catholic Moidart Rough Bounds, sometimes called the 'popish bounds' by Presbyterians and populated by Clanranald MacDonalds cadet clans of Morar, Kinlochmoidart,
Glenaladale and Borrodale. A guard of 50 men was formed to protect the Prince and with a retinue consisting furthermore of the Marquess of Tullibardine and Bishop Hugh MacDonald of Morar he left Kinlochmoidart, where he had been staying after Borrodale, walked three miles to Dalilea on the southwest end of Loch Shiel where the group took off in rowing boats to the north east end of the loch. Halfway there they spent the night in MacDonald of Glenaladale’s house, who owned Glenfinnan. The following morning…’ The P. set out from Glenaladals house about 6 a clock in the morning and arrived at Glenfinnin about eleven fornoon, being met at his landing by Mr. McDonald of Morror &c. with 150 men; about 2 a clock afternoon Lochiel appeared at the head of 700 men, and was soon followed by Keppoch with about 300 men; upon which the P. immediately causd erect the royall standard and proclaimed the K. his father.’

(from The Lockhart Papers' section Journals and Memoirs of PC's Expedition into Scotland by Angus MacDonald 1st of Borrodale, who was present at Glenfinnan)

Other sources claim that the Keppoch MacDonallds arrived later in the afternoon, and after the raising of the standard.

When the boats arrived at the head of the loch the men got out and stepped ashore. They were greeted by some 150 men from Morar.

Chagrined that there was no army of Lochiel Cameron’s clansmen awaiting him, Prince Charles took shelter in ‘a shieling’ in the glen. A hut in the township of Slatach is generally thought to be the shieling but I have never read in any contemporary books or later historical texts that it was indeed Slatach where the Prince took up residence. It could very well have been a hut in the since vanished township of Garbole, which is at roughly the same distance from the loch’s head as Slatach. Duffy claims that ‘Little Slatach House was the only building in the vicinity’ so he must have stayed there. He concludes that the hillside at Torr á Choit behind the visitor centre is therefore the right spot because the Prince crossed the Finnan before raising the flag. That the standard was raised ‘after they crossed the river Finnan’ is told in some contemporary sources. But Duffy’s Little Slatach House didn’t exist until seven years later, when Glenaladale began building his inn in the glen. The Prince must therefore have stayed in a hut or shieling in either Slatach or Garbole.

If he was in his hut in Slatach and heard the Cameron pipes he and his retinue must have crossed the river to meet them. But if the Prince’s hut wasn’t in Slatach but in Garbole this makes things a bit different. ‘Crossing the Finnan river’ would mean going to the west slope of the glen.

The claim by many writers that the Cameron men ‘descended the steep hills in a bizarre zigzag,’ is almost certainly a romantic addition. Coming from either Lochiel Cameron’s residence at Achnacarry in the east or from the direction of Glendessary and Kinlocharkaig in the north, where most of the clansmen lived, they could have used perfectly easy and flat routes to Glenfinnan without any hill climbing involved.
The only obstacle from the Glendessary/Kinlocharkaig area would have been the steady but gentle rising of Gleann Cuirnean at the beginning of their short journey into Glenfinnan. The zigzag element reflects the romantic view of the monument, most dramatically built at the head of the beautiful loch as a centerpiece of a Romantic Landscape. It was put there to tell the public a highly moving story, set in an amazingly beautiful decor. Hundreds of clansmen appearing on the hilltops and zigzagging down from all sides in dramatic fashion, kilted pipers blaring the ancient Clan Cameron war-pibrochs, to come and greet their long expected Prince and Liberator, fits that story as if Walter Scott had written it himself. More on this romantic view of Glenfinnan later on.

The same sources that say 'they crossed the river' also say that 'they found a slight eminence and proceeded to raise the standard.'

There are no eminences to speak of on the valley floor, not even slight ones, but there are two on the west and east sides of Glenfinnan that protrude into the valley that could house so many men around the flag without standing up to their knees in mud. It is only logical that these two stretches of hillside contain the two alternative sites for the Raising of the Standard that many believe are the true ones.

If you compare these two eminences it is clear that one is far more suitable than the other. That is the elevated piece of relatively flat hillside where the Church of St. Mary and St. Finnan now stands and just above which the inscribed rock was found in 1988. Altitude lines on a map show how suitable this location would be. Certainly when compared to the steepness of the area behind the visitor centre, which you can see for yourself at Google streetview:

(Select and paste in your browser) https://www.google.nl/maps/@56.8704376,-5.4350585,2a,75y,74.51h,83.51t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s00EXsaUNvORt0CdmUWNd0g!2e0!7i13312!8i6656?hl=en

Except for the suitability for a large gathering there is more that points to the inscribed rock as the correct spot of the Raising of the Standard. In summary, that and its opponent across the glen on the Torr á Choit hillside are far more likely.
spots than the monument on the shore, and the choice between the two depends on
the Prince's exact whereabouts as the Cameron men arrived in the glen.

But there is another clue to the likelihood of the rock slab and it's a strong one. It
has been buried in some archive for a long time, until Mr. Hugh Cheape of the
Royal Museum of Scotland unearthed it.

It is a text called Urain le Raoghall Donullach an Ardnis (published in 1821), a
Gaelic lament of one Alisdair MacDonald of Glenaladale who died in 1815. It
contains the following lines:

To the head of the revered family
Who will be lingering in Edinburgh
In his winter-house and without the power of moving
And to his raising a stone and a tower
That were as memorials of gloom

This Alisdair Glenaladale is no other than the man who commissioned the building
of the Glenfinnan Memorial Tower to commemorate his valiant Clanranald
ancestors who fought and died for Prince Charles Edward Stuart's cause. He seems
to have commissioned a stone as well. I wonder why that is...

To get to know this man, nick named Alisdair Ruadh or Red Alexander, born in
1787, we must dive into his family's past, all the way to the Prince's landing in Loch
nan Uamh and his stay in Borrodale House.

Laird of Borrodale was old Angus MacDonald of Clanranald 1st Borrodale, a brother
of Alexander MacDonald 7th Glenaladale. Angus had four sons, three of whom
joined Prince Charles' army. The eldest, Alexander, wasn't present at Borrodale in
July 1745. He had just left for the West Indies trying to make his fortune.

In Jamaica Alexander bought a coffee plantation. Coffee was on the rise all over
Europe as the beverage of choice for the well to do. Coffee houses opened in all
major cities. He married a wealthy plantation widow, Mrs. Handyside of Jamaica
and they had two sons. Unfortunately the boys both died during their journey to the
United Kingdom to receive a proper education. Soon after she heard of their fate
Alexander's wife died as well. He inherited her wealth and became so rich that he
earned the sobriquet 'an Oir,' or 'of the Gold.' His Jamaican friends just called him
Golden Sandy.

Back in Scotland in around 1770 Golden Sandy wanted to enlarge his estate
according to his wealthy status. His big chance came in 1773. His cousin 'Captain'
John 8th Glenaladale, eldest son of Alexander 7th Glenaladale, put up the entire
Glenaladale estate for sale and with the proceeds planned to take some two
hundred Clanranald kinsmen from Arisaig and South Uist to the America's, to
begin a new life on Prince Edward's Island. The West Highlands and Islands were
increasingly in turmoil as Protestantism began to encroach on the traditionally
ultra Catholic region and clan chiefs as well as their factors more and more saw their lands as a business opportunity rather than as their ancient and revered clan ground. It was a foreshadow of the terrible Highland Clearances of the early nineteenth century. (read John Prebble’s The Highland Clearances)

After a conflict with his cousin Collin MacDonald of Boisdale in South Uist, who was a fanatical Presbyterian that threatened the entire population of his estate with eviction unless they converted to Protestantism, Captain John felt bitter and disillusioned with the commercial and religious course Scotland was taking. With the proceeds from the sale of his estate in Moidart he traveled to London and bought a lot on Prince Edward's Island. Then he went to Greenock and bought the brig Alexander, took his clansmen aboard and sailed across the ocean.

(further reading on this at http://vre2.upei.ca/islandmagazine/fedora/repository/vre%3Aislemag-batch2-389/OBJ)

Alisdair an Oir bought the estate, which included Glenfinnan, from his cousin and now proudly styled himself Alisdair MacDonald of Clanranald 9th Glenaladale and went looking for a proper wife again.

He married Catherine MacGregor who bore him three sons. Two of them died in infancy. The third, Alisdair Ruadh (Red Alexander), on the death of Golden Sandy in 1799 became the immensely rich 10th Laird of Glenaladale. He was twelve years old.

A wonderful article called A Romantic folly to Romantic folly: the Glenfinnan Monument reassessed, by Neil Cameron, literally opens the books on rich and colorful Alisdair Ruadh, ‘a flamboyant character who lived a prodigal life of unfettered consumption.’ It emanates from a survey and research project carried out by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) and is based on a wealth of personal papers from the Glenaladale family that the writer has been granted access to.


Alexander’s unfettered consumption, for which curiously enough he hardly ever paid, consisted for a large part of enormous amounts of alcohol. The article lists wines, beers and assorted liquors he very frequently bought for parties in his Edinburgh dives and in his mansion in the Highlands.

Besides booze Red Alex also bought a lot of other stuff, like fancy clothes. It was during the Regency, the post Waterloo era of bucks, beaus and dandies. Moneyed Highland lairds visited London and participated in the new rage of romanticism and a hedonistic lifestyle inspired by the powerful British Empire. Besides in Edinburgh and Glasgow Alisdair Ruadh had a tailor in London. He was a posh young Regency buck. That he also bought ploughs and lots of land to plough in his beloved Moidart doesn’t change the picture that the article presents of him, that of a young man with far too much money on his hands and a destructive fondness of drinking.
From Neil Cameron's article: "In 1813 Bishop Chisholm of Lismore, to whom MacDonald owed over £2000, wrote to him of his reputation as 'a rake & one head & ears in debt'. Following a 'jaunt' to the Hebrides with Clanranald which 'did not increase your good name', he was exhorted by Bishop Chisholm to 'wash away past stains and secure the grace & protection of your Creator for the remainder of your temporal existence.'"

And: "One of his creditors even wrote to him shortly before his death, saying 'I hope that you will soon extract yourself from being obliged to me or any other in this way by getting a Fair Lady by the hand that will set you upright.'"

From Swan's views of the lakes of Scotland - Joseph Swan, published in 1836

For the time being however he was too busy partying and chasing cool Regency hobbies to be interested in finding a wife.

The sport of shooting fowl became hip. Since he possessed ample money and opportunity for this new rage Alisdair bought a set of double barrel shotguns, which he didn't pay for, and began fantasizing about a shooting range on his estate. He was a man living in two worlds. A hedonist dandy in the city and an elegantly dressed laird in the Highlands, fond of his ancestry of the proud and warlike clan of Clanranald. Maybe he could combine his two dreams and build a tower on the shore of Loch Shiel to honor his clan's past and enjoy the pleasure of shooting ducks at the same time.

In the year 1811 he commissioned one of the most popular architects in Scotland, James Gillespie, to draw plans and a few years later construction began of the tower that would in later years evolve into the monument as we now know it. As can be seen on the only surviving picture, that of engraver Joseph Swan, Alisdair succeeded in combining his two purposes for the tower. Joined to the memorial tower is a small shooting box. The combination wasn't very pretty and did draw some sardonic criticism from contemporaries. Read Neil Cameron's article for a hilarious example (footnote 38).
Despite its apparent ugliness he had his memorial shooting tower placed in the most arresting spot in the glen. No doubt he wanted to enhance his image as a cultured fellow with modern taste, like his friends in the city were. When the traveler rounded the corner coming from the east he was suddenly confronted with an awe inspiring and deeply romantic landscape of a lonely tower on the shore of a loch running away majestically into the distance, and framed on either side by the striking hills of Moidart on the right and Sunart on the left.

It was a picture perfect example of the Romantic architectural fashion of the time. Romanticism could roughly be described as a deeper understanding of the aesthetics and emotions of buildings inspired by an untamed and raw natural landscape. A definition that pretty well describes Alisdair himself as a man combining two different lifestyles. He was like a fairytale neo-gothic house in the wild Moidart Rough Bounds.

The same dual picture of himself - elegant dandy and rough Highlander - can be seen reflected in his decision to leave not one but two 'memorials of gloom' for his brave and loyal clansmen that fought and died in the Battle of Culloden. Adding to his dramatically but unrealistically placed Glenfinnan Monument on the most striking spot in the glen, he had a text carved out in the flat slab of rock where the event had really taken place. In short Alisdair Ruadh 'raised a stone and a tower...'

From Neil Cameron's article a chain of telling details leads to another way of describing the man. On the 21st of May 1808 he bought a massive amount of assorted wines, beers and liquors at a wine merchant in Greenock. It was undoubtedly meant for a huge party to be held at his mansion in Glenaladale to celebrate his coming of age in that year. The stuff would have been either sailed along the west coast or driven by carts overland, in both cases taking days to reach the estate in Moidart. This leads to an estimated date of birth shortly after May 21. For those who have anything with astrology, this makes Red Alex a Gemini, a sign that is notorious for its duality, for living in two different worlds...
If Alisdair Ruadh is indeed the one who had the rock inscribed, he had to have known all the details of the ceremony of sixty five years before. The carved footprints must point to the exact locations of the three main participants, otherwise why make them? So whoever had the rock inscribed must have been familiar with these exact spots. He must have been shown them by someone who had himself been present at the time, or a descendant of that man who in turn had been shown the spots. This person must have taken Alisdair there and told him the full story of how Bishop Hugh MacDonald had blessed the banner when Prince Charles raised it in the air, where the Marquess of Tullibardine had stood and how many Cameron clansmen were watching and cheering from the more or less flat piece of hillside slightly below the rock, where the church was built a century later.

One can imagine the young laird spending a lot of time in his uncle's inn in Glenfinnan, now the Glenfinnan Hotel, reminiscing with the Clanranald locals about the fateful campaign that ended on the bloody field of Culloden. He appears to have been a very likable fellow (many Gemini's are). Maybe it was one of them who joined him in a dram and told him of the place up on the hillside. Their fathers and uncles themselves probably were present at the glorious event.

Alisdair's own relatives, his grandfather Angus of Borrodale and his three sons certainly had. It is hard to imagine that none of these close relatives that survived Culloden, Angus, and his sons John (Iain Og) and Ranald, at one time took their young cousin or their eldest son and brother (who as we have seen had returned to Scotland in ca. 1770) to the place on the hillside and showed them all the physical details. This being one of the most glorious events in Clanranald history. Golden Sandy died in 1799 when his son was twelve. So even if the chain of knowledge of the Raising of the Standard is one step longer, it remains unbroken. Alisdair could have known where to put the footsteps on the rock.

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In conclusion there are two theories that point to the true spot of the Raising of the Stuart Standard in Glenfinnan. Torr á Choit or the place above the church of St. Mary and St. Finnan. They depend on where Bonnie Prince Charlie had his temporary residence, in Slatach or in Garbole. But two things seem to point in the direction of the western hillside. It is much more suitable for a gathering of 800 to 1200 men, and a local lament of a onetime Laird of Glenaladale who left to posterity a tower and a stone.

Mr. Cameron, on whose article the part of this text concerning Alisdair Ruadh's personality and motivation relies, is of the opinion that the rock is probably the most logical spot, but dismisses claims that the monument is 'in the wrong place.' He says these claims only look at it in geophysical terms and not in cultural (Romantic) ones. He sticks to the monument because to Alisdair Ruadh's mind it was in the 'right' place. His article's title A Romantic Folly to Romantic Folly indicates what he thinks of those who disagree with his opinion about the monument and the meaning of its place in the glen.
I think it is equally important to try to designate an exact spot to this great event, the beginning of the last and greatest of the Jacobite risings. Somewhere people can go to and experience that extraordinary feeling of standing on the very spot where this crucial event took place. The wonderful sensation of being in the centre of Scottish history for a brief moment in time.

Alisdair Ruadh MacDonald of Clanranald 10th Glenaladale never shot one duck from his shooting box. But then he hadn't paid off his shotguns either. And sadly he never found his fair lady. Whatever the reason for his heavy drinking was, it drove him to an early grave in January 1815, at the age of 28. His stone was ready, his tower wasn't. When it was, a few months after his death, a marble slab was fixed to it that became his ancestors’ and his own memorial of gloom.

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Kees Slings, October 2018

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Scroll down for more of Iain Thornber’s photo's from 1988.