

Special forces in the Little Rising

How the Munros took to the field for the last time as a clan at the battle of Glenshiel

By Dr Jean Munro

The '19 has been called 'the little Rising' in contrast to the better known events of 1715 and 1745. It was short and a complete failure, but has a place in Munro history as the setting for the last battle in which the clan took part as a separate body. In 1745, there was a unit appearing at Falkirk and Culloden as *Munros'* but this was, in fact a regiment of the regular British Army (later the 33rd Regiment) named, as was then the custom, after its commanding officer – Sir Robert Munro of Foulis.

Sir Robert was killed at Falkirk three months before Culloden, but many of the contemporary plans and accounts of the battle of Culloden still use his name for the regiment which included few, if any, other Munros. The regiment later became known as *Dejean's* when Lt-Col. Louis Dejean was promoted, and then as the Hampshire Regiment. Clansmen had followed a number of Munro officers into one of the Independent Companies linked to the British Army.



Glenshiel looking northwest with the old military road crossing the River Shiel. Contemporary sources place the Government forces in the foreground, with the Munros to the left of the picture, facing up the glen.



Glenshiel looking southeast. The Jacobite forces advanced up the glen and engaged the Government army at the narrowest part of the valley in the centre of the picture. The Jacobites fled up the slopes to the left.

The '15 had ended with James (the Old Pretender) and his supporters returning into exile, but not in a very decisive defeat for their cause. So there were soon plans for a renewed invasion. Clearly the Jacobites needed backing from a major European power with money, munitions and troops, and so had to find a country ready for war with Britain and willing to back an invasion as a diversion.

After diplomatic comings and goings with France, the traditional enemy, and Sweden through rivalry with Hanover, it was finally Spain which fell out with Britain in 1717. A plan was made by which a Spanish force under the Duke of Ormond would invade the west of England, while the Jacobites would land in the west Highlands.

In March 1719, the two fleets sailed, but the Spaniards were beaten back by a gale while the Jacobites under Earl Marischal, with two frigates carrying more than 300 regular Spanish officers and men, reached the isle of Lewis in early April. In Stronway, they were joined by a party from Paris, much smaller than expected, which included the Earl of Seaforth and the Marquis of Tullibardin.

This gave rise to difficulties in the chain of command, with the result that some leaders wanted to wait for news of Ormond's expedition while still in comparative safety on Lewis. But the opposite decision was taken and the Jacobite force set out for the mainland, with Marischal retaining control of the ships while Tullibardin took command of the land forces, reaching Loch Alsh in Kintail by mid-April.

Here the Jacobites made their headquarters in Seaforth's castle of Eilean Donan where, with a garrison of 45 Spaniards, they stored their ammunition. The rest of the Jacobite army camped on the nearby shore of the loch, and were joined by some local support from Seaforth's Mackenzies and clansmen under Macdonald of Clanranald and Cameron of Lochiel.

Once again the leaders differed in their views – some were already anxious to withdraw, but against much advice, the frigates were sent away, leaving the army with no means of retreat. Plans to march and attack Inverness were abandoned and they still waited for news and more local support, neither of which arrived. What did arrive, on the 10th May, were five ships of the British navy which fired on the castle before landing a force to storm it. The Spanish garrison was taken prisoner and the ammunition and stores blown up. The Jacobites were now cut off from the sea. Moving east to the head of Loch Duich, they again waited for recruits and more support, but little of either arrived. Tullibardin's hopes to raise the clans to the cause came to almost nothing, and only a token force came to aid the Jacobites. By this stage, it was known that Ormond's invasion of England had been called off.



Eilean Donan – the Mackenzie Seaforth's coastal stronghold which became the Jacobites' headquarters.

The government in Scotland had meanwhile been alerted. The garrison at Inverness had been reinforced, and General Wightman marched west with his force of about 850 infantry, 120 dragoons and about 130 Highlanders which included the Munros. The chief at this time, the blind Sir Robert, was unfit for service and, with his eldest son absent in London, a party had been recruited by his second son, George Munro of Culcairn, to act as guides for the regular troops through the wild and unfamiliar country between Loch Ness and Kintail.

In a memorial, George later wrote: *“When Generall Whightman having determined to march from Inverness, the beginning of June 1719, against the Spaniards and the attainted noblemen and gentlemen who joined yhem, did upon the 28th of May desire the Memorialist to joyn him with one hundred men of the Clan Munro, when accordingly the Memorialist the 30th May marched to Inverness with one hundred private men, six officers, four serjeants, and one pyper, with who he went to Glenshall.”*

The Jacobites waited for their enemy in Glenshiel, some 15 miles east of their former base at Eilean Donan, at a point where the glen narrows and the river crossing is overlooked by steep hills on both sides. The battle began at about five o'clock in the evening of the 10th June, when, after shelling by the mortars, the government left wing, consisting of the Munros and four platoons of Colonel Clayton's regiment, attacked the Jacobites.

At first they were repulsed, but with reinforcements they attacked again and drove the Jacobites back across the river and took a small hill which commanded the pass. The right wing of the Jacobites and meanwhile been dislodged and the men driven up the steep hillside. The Spaniards and the rest of the Jacobites held their ground in the centre for a time, but were also eventually forced to retreat up the hill. Action ceased after some three hours of fighting when darkness fell and the government forces were left in possession of the pass. The Jacobites had nowhere to go and agreed among themselves that the 247 Spaniards, who would be treated as prisoners of war, should surrender while “everyone else took the road he liked best” and quietly dispersed.

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Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland, this contemporary map by John Henry Bastide of the battle showing the formation and position of the Government army straddling the river to the right and the different positions of the forces as the battle moved up the valley. The Monro's Highlanders are shown as being on the Government's left flank with The Sutherlands Highlds on the right flank.

There were comparatively few casualties – probably not more than 100 killed or wounded among the Jacobites, though this was difficult to estimate with the general scatter, and 21 killed and 121 wounded on the government side. The latter included three officers killed and a number wounded – one of whom was George Munro of Culcairn who was reported severely wounded on the thigh “but the bone safe”. Of the other Munros, George would record: “the Eldest Captain [was shot] thro the cheek and shoulder, and... three private men killed in the action, and thirteen wounded, of whom two dyed in the hospital at Inverness, and nine men remain still there [February 1720] at the Memorialist's expence, five being utterly disabled.”

General Wightman set up camp in Kintail “to put Dread upon those concerned in this late rebellion” but was back in Inverness by the end of the month. Apart from Wightman's visit to Kintail, there was little government reaction to the Jacobite disaster of 1719. The only light on the horizon for the Jacobites was the marriage of James in that year and the birth in 1720 of Charles Edward – whom history would come to know as Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender.

A modern historian has written “The battle of Glen Shiel had been well fought on both sides – the Spanish and British regulars did their job in a professional fashion and the Jacobite Highlanders who stood the mortar bombs, grenades and musketry of the Hanoverian forces for three hours showed extraordinary staunchness.” The real difference lay in the Jacobite leadership, whose disagreements had long ago landed their followers in an impossible situation.

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Battle site visiting

It is not difficult to find the Glen Shiel battle site. The A87 trunk road passes along the length of Glen Shiel as it links Invergarry with the Kyle of Lochalsh, and the location is marked on the Ordnance Survey maps of the area. There is little evidence on the ground to suggest anything of a battleground, but the action spread over a sizeable part of the glen – a little imagination is all that is required to appreciate the difficulty in doing battle in such terrain. The scenery is some of the finest in the western Highlands and includes the Five Sisters of Kintail and convenient road-side parking where the old military road crosses the river makes an ideal stopping point.