

**BENIGHTED**

JOHN E. M. DUFF

*Transcript of a letter from Charles McHardy, Chief Constable of Dunbartonshire, in 1912. His father William was Head Keeper on Mar Lodge Estate.*

Millglen, Helensburgh,  
Dunbartonshire.  
15th. December, 1912.

Revd. Dear Mr Lundie,

As promised, I now send you an account of my experience on the Cairnwall, in a winter night in 1867. In the beginning of that year, I received a telegram from Braemar, that my Father was seriously ill and that he wanted to see me. I accordingly made arrangements and proceeded north the following morning by first train from Glasgow, arriving at Blairgowrie about ten o'clock. There was a good fall of snow on the ground, but a thaw had set in with heavy rain, so I made up my mind to call on Factor Cumming, my old master who resided at Rattray, Blairgowrie, with a view to getting his pony to ride on to the Spittal, but on calling at his house I was informed that he had died and was buried on the previous day.

This was indeed sad news for me. I then started to walk to the Spittal, but before going very far was drenched to the skin. Every 50 yards or so, there were wreaths of snow upon the road, knee deep, and being soft made walking very difficult. I arrived at the Spittal about 4pm, and the weather had then changed from rain and sleet into dry snow and frost. After getting something to eat at the hotel, I started for the Ruidorrach, intending to stay there over night with the keeper, (who I understood was a son of the late Harry Michie, of Glengairn, whom I knew well), if he thought I would be unable to cross the hill.

Before reaching Ruidorrach the snow storm had increased to, what the Braemar people would have called, a 'Hurricane of Blind Drift'. On my arrival there I rapped at the door and a man, whom I did not know, appeared, partly opening the door. I asked if Mr Michie lived there. He replied no. I then endeavoured to explain to him that I was on my way to Braemar, and seeing the storm had set in so severe I was in hopes of obtaining shelter for the night. The answer I got impressed me with the idea that this man and Michie were not on friendly terms, and that I was looked on as a spy. I asked if he thought I could cross the hill. He replied yes, and closed the door. You can easily understand my feelings under such circumstances, and how kindly I would have been welcomed had your father and mother been still there. I would have felt quite pleased if the keeper had even offered to show me over

the hill. I had to consider whether I should return to the hotel for the night, or attempt the hill.

My clothes, which had been soaking wet, were now hard and frozen over with snow. I however felt quite warm and fit, and seeing that it was early in the night (5.30pm) I calculated, that if I got over the hill all right, that I would be at my Father's house, in Mar Forest, by 10pm. I also thought that if I went back to the Hotel, and the storm continued that I might not be able to cross the hill for some time, so I made up my mind if the hill could be crossed, that I would make the attempt, and started off, finding my way by pressing my walking stick down in the snow until I felt the iron on the end of my stick touch the road metal, but on making my way up the shoulder of the hill till about the elbow, I could not make out the road after that, as the snow became so deep and the drift so severe that I could not make headway with any degree of certainty, and dreading getting into the glen, as I was not sure if the road was above or below where I was.

I did endeavour to make my way back to Ruidorrach, but failed, and for a time could not make out south, north, east or west. I then endeavoured to clear away the snow in different parts as best I could, to discover the lie of the ground, and so far, discovered my position. I saw I had no alternative but remain where I was for the night, which I did until 5am next morning. I knew from the state I was in, that if I allowed myself to cool down, that I would perish. I then started to dance, and continued dancing the whole night. About midnight I became very sleepy and hungry, and was sorry I had not a piece of bread in my pocket. I remember, so well, of my tumbling down in the snow, then fast asleep, and the sudden fall in the dry snow almost suffocated me, which caused me to waken up, and I continued my exercise as best I could. While so engaged I prayed earnestly to God to protect me, and I seemed to have a keen presentiment that I would be able to pull through.

About 4am I felt my feet beginning to get numb and very heavy. Just then, the snow storm ceased, and the sky became clear, which enabled me to survey my position and ground, with some degree of confidence. I felt satisfied that I was considerably above the road, and as dawn set in (about 5am) I discovered an object which attracted my attention, from the strange appearance it had in the snow, and I made my way down to this object, which turned out to be the wooden fence on the side of the road at the top of the Cairnwall. I knew then exactly where I was (and the locus, thus described, will be quite familiar to yourself). I made tracks as quick as I could down the other side and on reaching the Shinvel Bridge I felt quite fresh again, and vigorous, and I ran (trotted) all the way from there, in the snow, to my friends house at Croftmicken, Braemar, where George McHardy then stayed; arriving there before they were out of bed.

On my rapping at Croftmicken door, and calling out, "Eirich agus leig a teach me", (rise and let me in) I fancy still I hear Mrs McHardy's voice saying "that's Tearlach Bhuie at the door", and her husband saying "No, no,

it cannot be him". I replied "Yes, it is Tearlach Bhuie, please let me in". The old man immediately opened the door for me, and his wife having procured a light, I walked in, and seeing the state I was in with frozen ice and snow, they were very much affected, and gave me a little spirits, and endeavoured to take the ice from off the hair of my head, whiskers, and eyebrows etc., but after having entered the warm room, my eyelids etc. etc. became so inflamed, and so painful to me, that I could not suffer them to touch, even the ice that was attached to them, so with difficulty I got off my clothes and got into bed and covered myself up (ice and all) with blankets and immediately fell fast asleep.

I wakened up about 11am and felt quite fresh, and was very thankful indeed to find that I was none the worse of the severe trial I had undergone, and so were my friends at Croftmicken. After getting breakfast, I proceeded on to my father's (west of Mar Lodge), and my visit there in such a storm was an agreeable surprise for my parents. After a time I told my father and mother how I had been storm-stayed over the night on the Cairnwall, and mentioned how disappointed I was at the manner in which the keeper at Ruidorrach had received me, and after relating the whole circumstances, my father told me that he had heard that there had been a quarrel between there, and that Michie had been removed, and he advised me (seeing I was none the worse of what had occurred) to say nothing about the matter, as from what I had said, it appeared to him that the keeper had possibly a 'deer' in the house when I called, and that he would be suspicious of me, when I mentioned Michie's name, as the quarrel between these keepers was over the killing of deer. I quite agreed with my father's opinion, and took no more notice of the matter.

When the snow cleared away, I returned south again by the Cairnwall, but did not feel inclined to call at Ruidorrach, not that I had any unkind feelings against the keeper, but as I had resolved to take no more notice of the occurrence I thought it would be better for me not to call.

Now that I am getting up in years, many times do I think of my experience on the Cairnwall that night, and although I feel strong and healthy, I am sure I could not undergo one tenth part of what I suffered then, without fatal results.

I must now conclude with kind regards, and I hope if you have occasion to come this way you will give me a call, you may rely on being made heartily welcome.

Yours sincerely,

(sgd) Chas. McHardy

*The McHardy family of Braemar originated in Daldownie, Glengairn, and included many heavyweight athletes of outstanding prowess. Charles's father, William, who was head keeper on Mar, was described as 'a great man for*

heavy lifts', and once, in some sort of elephantine joke, threw the lifting stone at Inver (2681b) into the carrier's cart. William's brother John won so many prizes at early Braemar Gatherings that rules had to be devised to prevent the same person winning first prizes year after year. Charles himself, as a youth of 18 years, beat Donald Dinnie, aged 25, into second place at the caber at Braemar, and was an outstanding 'heavy' for many years. This branch of the family was known as the 'Buie' McHardys because at one time they lived in the Ballochbuie: hence 'Tearlach Buie'.

William's family, however, nine in number, have another claim to fame, being unique in Scottish police history. Alexander became Chief Constable of Inverness-shire, and Charles, the writer of the letter, was Chief Constable of Dunbartonshire. Between them, they completed 104 years Police service, with 75 as Chief Constable. A third brother, William, became an Inspector in the Aberdeenshire force, while a fourth, Peter, went in a different direction and became an Officer of Customs and Excise.

The steading at Croftmicken, George McHardy's farm, is now the Braemar Golf Clubhouse, while the old house at Ruidorrach in Gleann Beag was recently demolished to make way for a modern home. William McHardy died in June of 1867, so the occasion of the snowstorm was probably the last time that Charles saw his father. Charles's great grandson, Bruce McHardy, visited Braemar recently from his home in Ontario, and it was from him that I acquired the above copy letter along with other documents, including an eye-witness account by William of a deer drive in Mar Forest in 1850.

John Duff continues:

*I am not suggesting that Highland Dancing is a potent survival tool for the benighted climber, but I do think Charles McHardy's experience highlights some relevant points. Firstly, he was an extremely powerful young man of 23 years, in peak of physical condition, otherwise he would never had the stamina to expend the amount of energy that he did over an extended period. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, he never allowed himself to lose control of the situation in that as soon as he realised he had lost his bearings, he stopped, assessed the position and took a rational decision: he never allowed himself to become hopelessly lost. Thirdly and crucially, he never panicked, even when he thought he might well perish.*