

The Thursday saint and John Smith

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

EVEN without the death of John Smith, there would have been only one possible subject for an article on Gaelic tradition to appear on Thursday 9 June. Let me explain why.

The ninth of June is St Columba's Day, *Latha Fhéill Caluim Chille*. In addition, every Thursday in the year is, or was, sacred to Calum Cille's memory. When the ninth of June actually falls on a Thursday, then, a day of very special holiness is created. (I am talking here, of course, of the way people used to think, not necessarily of how anyone thinks now.) In 'practical' terms, then, a ninth of June which happened to be a Thursday would have been a day on which prayer to Calum Cille would be particularly likely to be answered, and sacrifice of some sort to Calum Cille — a pilgrimage to a well sacred to his name, let's say — would be particularly likely to be effective.

But what of John Smith? It is of course a month since he died, and he died on a Thursday, and was buried in *Ì Chalum Chille*, Calum Cille's Iona. He died with his eye firmly fixed on today, not of course because it is St Columba's Day but because it is the day of the European elections.

I have before me a Press Release headed "The Burial of the Rt Hon John Smith QC MP" issued by the Labour Party at 150 Walworth Road in London on 18 May. I find it a fascinating document, because it strays far out of the Labour Party's territory and into mine, if I may put it that way. First it announces the arrangements for the private funeral in Iona on Saturday 21 May, and reminds the media of the Press Complaints Commission's code of practice on privacy and the rules regarding intrusion into grief. It talks of John Smith's love for the island, of the holidays that he and his family used to enjoy there, of the "Iona Community", and of his support for its ideals of living Christianity and social justice.

Then comes the Quern-Dust bit, headed "Background notes on the island of Iona". It begins: "Iona is a small Hebridean island off the west coast of Scotland. It has a population of about 90 people. Iona has a unique place in the history of Scotland. It is generally accepted to be the birthplace of Christianity in Scotland, and the cradle of Scottish kings. The first kings of Scotland were buried there, including King Duncan and his murderer Macbeth. Early kings of Ireland, Norway and France are said to rest there. The Chief Druid Priest of Celtic Britain — Odhrain — is also buried on the island."

The Labour Party then goes on to talk of Calum Cille himself. "The island's primary importance is its position at the heart of Celtic Christianity. Saint Columba landed on the island from Ireland in the 6th century (563 AD) to begin his Christianisation of Scotland. He established an Abbey and a Christian brotherhood, and from Iona Columba sent missionaries throughout Scotland to preach Christianity. The influence of this first Christian Community extended beyond Scotland into Continental Europe. Saint Columba died in 597 and was buried on the island. By the early Middle Ages it was commonly understood throughout Europe that the three centres of Christianity were Jerusalem, Rome, and Iona."

It was on 9 June in the year 597 that Calum Cille was assumed into heaven for the last time. Not on his own holy day of Thursday, but on the eve of the only day of the week that was holier than that. St Adamnan wrote that, on the last day of his life, Saturday 8 June, Calum Cille said to his attendant Diarmaid, "This day is called in the holy scriptures the sabbath, which means rest. And this day is indeed a sabbath to me, for it is my last day of this present laborious life. On it I rest after my toilsome labours; and at midnight of this following venerated Lord's Day, in the language of the scriptures, I will go the way of the fathers."

But it is the Labour Party's reference to Odhrain as the "Chief Druid Priest of Celtic Britain" that fascinates me most of all. I wonder what source they were using? I thought that Odhrain was universally regarded not as a pagan druid but as a Christian saint. He was the monk who was buried alive by Calum Cille, a story which I mentioned in my account of "London Bridge" just a few weeks ago. When he founded his monastery Calum Cille was told by God that one of his companions must be buried alive as a sacrificial offering. Odhrain selflessly volunteered, and after three days and nights Calum Cille opened up the grave to see how his friend was getting on, and Odhrain declared:

*Chan eil am bàs 'na iongantas
No Ifrinn mar a dh'aithrisear.*

(Death is no marvel / Nor is Hell as described.) In another version he adds even more heretically, "Nor is the good man eternally happy / Nor is the bad man eternally unhappy." In any event Calum Cille was so shocked at this blasphemy that he covered Odhrain up again as quickly as he could, exclaiming:

*Ùir, ùir air sùil Udhrain
Mun dùisg e 'n corr caramaisg!*

(Earth, earth on Odhrain's eye / Before he makes more controversy!) It is clear to me that the afterlife witnessed by Odhrain was not the Christian Heaven and Hell but the pagan Celtic Otherworld where people dance, sing, argue and fight forever, a place that is Heaven and Hell rolled into one and not all that much

different from life before death. That is why I find it so fascinating that the Labour Party calls St Odhran the Chief Druid Priest of Celtic Britain, and I wonder where they got it from. If we see Odhran as no Christian monk at all but a great pagan, it not only explains his highly unscriptural vision of the afterlife, but also why Calum Cille should have been so willing to use him as his foundation sacrifice! He is, of course, the man who gave his name to Réilig Odhrain, the burial place of the kings.

I quoted that Press Release to my eighty or so Celtic Civilisation students at Edinburgh University in their final lecture of the year. But I also quoted John Smith's own words from an article he had written in the House of Commons Magazine, and which was reprinted in the "Daily Express" the day after he died, because it seemed to me that they encapsulated three of the strands that can be found running through the society of the Celts from the time that they clashed with the Romans until we see them to this day in modern Scotland, Ireland and Wales. The first strand is a love of education, although Smith spoiled this point a little by restricting his reference to teachers' families. The second strand is contempt of money, and this was a wonderfully courageous thing for a Shadow Chancellor or Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition to say. The third strand is that the Celts always contrived to be monarchist and egalitarian at the same time — a strange combination which Smith sums up beautifully as "a non-class society in a funny sort of way".

Here are his exact words, just as I quoted them in the exam which the Celtic Civilisation students sat on Monday.

"If you are a child of a teacher's family in the Highlands, education is worshipped. In our family money was really looked down on and education was revered. The person who was educated was the person to be admired and I think that is still my view. I am still slightly contemptuous of money.

"There was also a tradition, of which my father was part, of Highland schoolmasters being radical at the same time as having the slightly conservative views of that rural part of the world. We were a non-class society in a funny sort of way. It was the minister, the doctor and the schoolmaster who were the important people.

"I am a very lucky person to have had such a good education. I believe passionately that education is the great liberator. It can teach a simple technical skill and also open the doors of the imagination, which is the biggest case for it. It breaks down class barriers and frees people so I am a bit of an evangelical about that.

"This country has too few national objectives and it should be a national objective to have the best trained workforce in Europe. I am a very strong defender of state education."

But this is the Quern-Dust Calendar, and I have yet to try to explain why Thursday should have been sacred to the memory of Calum Cille. His medieval biographers tell us that he was born on a Thursday, and one version of his life adds: "Colum Cille, moreover, used to go to heaven when he wished, every Thursday while he was alive." In historical terms, the claim may be seen as directly parallel to those made of St Patrick that the latter was "visited by the everlasting God every seventh day" and that every Sunday he remained in his cell and "enjoyed the conversation of the angels". Such claims may be seen as in direct competition with each other, advanced as they were by the rival protagonists of the immensely powerful monastic organisations of these two great saints. Thursday, the day of the Last Supper, was being set against Sunday, the day of the Resurrection, and these became the twin holy days of the week in Gaelic Scotland — Thursday the Fast Day, Sunday the Lord's Day.

Could it go deeper still? According to the Brothers Grimm, some special observance continued to be paid for centuries to Thursday in Central Europe, and at least one scholar has speculated that this has to do with the warrior-god Thor who gave his name to Thursday, just as the warrior-god Jupiter or Jove had given the Romans their name for the same day (still seen in French *jeudi*). When legends speak of Calum Cille's weekly visit to heaven, and of how he buried Odhran alive, they are surely portraying him as more god than saint. And in terms of Roman astrology the planet Jupiter, just like Calum Cille and his day, was wholly beneficent. Is it possible that the warrior-saint Calum Cille was seen as a Thor-like or Jupiter-like figure?

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