

Marymas: markets, first fruits and a prophecy

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN OUR ancestors' calendar this was the time of the *Féill Moire*. At the root of it is the Feast of the Assumption — *Latha Fhéill Moire*, literally the Feast Day of the Virgin Mary — which originally fell on 15 August. The assumption of Mary into heaven is of course non-scriptural, but tradition (no less in Scotland than anywhere else) dictates that 15 August is her principal feast-day. In Gaelic it was *Latha Fhéill Moire Mór*, and in Scots it was Great Marymas. As the rhyme says:

*Latha Fhéill Moire Mór nan cliar
Seachainn oirnn an stoirm on iar.*

(On Great Marymas of the clergy / Ward from us the westerly gale.)

When the Government brought in the Gregorian Calendar (the 'New Style') in 1752, the 15th of August became the 26th, and subsequently (from 1800) the 27th. Once an important date started moving, it was hard to get it to stop. Writing about 1830, James Macintyre from Balquhidder in Perthshire gave *Mios na Féill Moire* as one of the names of September, and added that "on the first or 2nd day of this month (2nd Tuesday New Style) is the *Feill Moire*, a fair or tryst, at Falkirk".

It is true that the three great trysts at Falkirk, the largest cattle fairs in Scotland, were held in Macintyre's day on every second Tuesday of August, September and October, but I have not otherwise seen the September tryst referred to as the *Féill Moire*. There was another St Mary's, the Feast of the Nativity or *Latha Breith na h-Òighe Moire* (Latter Lady Day) on 8 September (19-21 September New Style), but this is unlikely to be the one referred to, given that Macintyre says that the tryst was kept on 1 or 2 September Old Style. In the days when the great trysts were still being held at Crieff, Falkirk had a fair on 15 August, and clearly its Gaelic name stuck. I think it can reasonably be concluded that the period beginning 15 August was formerly known as *Mios na Féill Moire* and that after 1752 the name became attached to September. Thus the *Féill Moire* at Falkirk is the September Tryst at Falkirk.

Latha Fhéill Moire was kept in Uist in anticipation of the harvest. In "Carmina Gadelica" Alexander Carmichael describes what sounds like a private little family ritual of plucking ears of the growing corn, drying them, separating off the grain, winnowing it, grinding it, and finally baking it into a bannock called the *moilean Moire*. The man of the house broke the bannock and gave his wife and children a bit each. Then, walking *deiseil* (sunwise) round the fire in order of seniority, much as they were to do on horseback round the graves of their ancestors on *Latha Fhéill Micheil* (29 September), they sang *Iolach Mhoire Mhàthar*, the Cry of Mary Mother, which was given to Carmichael by Mór Gillies, a cottar of Muir of Aird, Benbecula. It includes the words:

*Mheil mi e air brà Di-Haoine,
Dh'fhuin mi e air crà na caoire,
Bhruich mi e ri àine caorainn
'S phàirtich mi e 'n dàil mo dhaoine . . .*

(I ground it on a quern on Fast-Day, / I kneaded it on fan of sheepskin, / I toasted it at rowan fire / And shared it round my people . . .) The use of *Di-Haoine* (Friday, literally 'Fast-Day'), is interesting. Either *Latha Fhéill Moire* was kept on the Friday nearest 15 August, or, more likely, the term is used here in the sense of a holy day when no flesh is eaten.

After the procession round the fire, the man of the house put its sacred embers with bits of old iron into a pot, which he then carried as they continued the procession *deiseil* round the outside of their house, and sometimes round their steadings and flocks, having gathered them for the purpose. "The scene," wrote Carmichael, "is striking and picturesque, the family being arrayed in their brightest and singing their best."

In complete contrast, *Latha Fhéill Moire* was celebrated in many other places with a public fair, notably Boharm (Banffshire), Cambusmore (Perthshire), Dunnet (Caithness), Fochabers, Inverness, Islay, Kilmallie (Lochaber), Cults of Leny in the Pass of Callander, Ruthven in Badenoch, and Thurso. In English these went under names as varied as Marymas, Mary Fair, St Mary's Fair and First Lady Day in Autumn.

The fair at Inverness on 15 August 1668 was marred by an affray long remembered as *Cath na Càise* or the Kebbock Day, after which the year was known as *Bliadhna Cath na Càise*. The horse market took place on a hill south of the Castle, and some women from Strath Nairn had positioned themselves on the brae to sell bread and cheese to the hungry crowds. An Inverness man, Fionnlagh Dubh, picked up a kebbok of cheese and asked the price. This he was told, at which, whether by accident or design, the cheese fell out of his hand and rolled down the hill into the river.

The woman told him he would have to pay for it. He refused. A Strath Nairn man then pinioned him and captured his bonnet as a pledge that he would pay. One of Fionnlagh Dubh's relations told him it was none of his business. "Yes," he retorted, "I am concerned as a witness to see just things."

It went from words to blows, and soon most of the hill was in confusion. Armed guards were called from the town. Their captain, John Reid, and others tried to mediate, but to no avail, so swords were drawn and guns were aimed. Hearing that his guards were losing control of the situation and that people were beginning to get hurt, Provost Alexander Cuthbert put on his steel cap, his sword and his shield, rang the alarm bell and

sallied forth with reinforcements. Meanwhile the people were baying for justice. The guards' patience snapped and they began firing. Two MacDonalds were killed outright, and over ten wounded, of whom two, a Cameron and a MacLellan, died later. This put a stop to it, all save the recriminations — the Provost defended his men with the words, "Who dares disturb the King's free burgh at a market time?"

In Thurso, Marymas was the greatest fair of the year. In 1794 it was described as beginning about the end of August and continuing for ten days, but by 1845 it was being held at the beginning of September. In the 1820s it gave rise to a strange episode involving two of the 'Men' of Caithness.

I should explain that the Men — *na Daoine* — were a caste of evangelical religious leaders in the North Highlands and Islands during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They might be elders or catechists or hold no formal office at all; they held no special academic qualifications; they had many of the gifts popularly associated with religious leadership, such as oratory, prophecy, memory, spiritual insight, knowledge of scripture and love of disputation; they had the respect of the people in a time when many ministers did not; and they had their own forum in the form of fellowship meetings and question days.

In the memorable phrase of the great Rev. Dr Kennedy of Dingwall, the Men were so called not because they were not women, but because they were not ministers. When notes of addresses at fellowship meetings were made, he pointed out, the easiest way of doing so was to say 'one of the ministers said this' or 'one of the men said that'.

I will have more to say about all this another time, but back to Marymas at Thurso. The two Men involved were Charles Gordon (1790-1837), a native of Strathnaver who had settled as a merchant in Thurso, and his spiritual father and fellow Gael, John Grant from Kildonan (1752-1829), who lived at Brubster in Reay. A company of strolling players came to the town at Marymas and took over an empty building opposite Gordon's shop. Their act seems to have drawn a big crowd which blocked the street. Not only were Gordon's religious sensibilities offended, but his regular customers began going elsewhere, and he found himself losing money. He demanded that the authorities do something about the nuisance, and the troupers were duly ordered to move. This they failed to do, and their two leading men were clapped into jail. The enraged troupers took legal advice, and on the strength of the strings that Gordon had pulled in the town, they found to their delight that they were able to sue him for damages before the Court of Session.

Gordon got word from his agent in Edinburgh that the case would be decided on a particular day, and that it looked like going against him. He went out to Brubster to discuss the situation with John Grant, and before they parted Grant said to him, "You may go home with an easy mind, for before the case is tried your persecutor will be in eternity, and no-one else will follow it up."

Later that week Gordon received news that his opponent was on his way to Edinburgh to attend the case when he fell from the top of the coach and was killed. And there, sure enough, the matter ended.

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