

## The Patron Saint of Western Europe

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

TODAY, 11 November, is Martinmas, the feast of St Martin, in Gaelic *Latha Fhéill Màrtainn*. Not a festival that's on everyone's lips, but its disappearance from our vocabulary is a recent thing. For a millennium and a half it was a major date in the calendar of Western Europe in general and the Highlands and Islands in particular.

For practical purposes Martinmas was the day that dominated the month of November. It was a legal term day, a time for paying rent and settling debts, a time too of clearance and eviction. It marked the final end of the harvest and therefore the return to school of young folk who could not be spared until then from farmwork, croftwork, housework or herding. There were markets and hiring fairs. Animals were slaughtered and salted down for the winter. In the bad old days it was the cattle-lifting season. The season for weddings began now too, and went on until the New Year.

More of these things later, but who was St Martin who presided over such a frenzy of activity? He was a native of Pannonia — roughly modern Hungary — who lived from about 315 to 397 AD, and his work in Gaul laid the basis for the Celtic Church of Patrick, Brigid and Calum Cille. He became Bishop of Tours, from which he was called in Gaelic *Màrtainn an Tùir*, St Martin of Tours — literally, of the Tower.

The curious thing about this great saint is that he is close to being the kind of 'holy fool' that I talked about in my last article. Or to put it another way, certain very prominent aspects of his legend were to become characteristics of 'holy folly'. Like Christ himself, he was a drop-out who made himself a laughing-stock by giving what little he had to the poor. This was to become the monastic ideal of the Middle Ages, best represented by Francis of Assisi, but in 4th-century Western Europe it seems to have been revolutionary.

Martin was named after the god Mars and brought up by his pagan father to be, like himself, a soldier of the Roman Empire. He grew up in Italy, at Pavia. One frosty night when serving as a young officer at Amiens in Gaul, he met a naked beggar. Taking off his splendid military cloak, he sliced it down the middle and gave the man half of it to keep him warm. The townspeople laughed at the Roman officer when they saw him wearing only half a cloak, but that night in a dream he heard Christ saying, "Martin has clothed me in his garment."

As a young convert, he became a conscientious objector, and asked for his discharge. "I am Christ's soldier," he said, "I am not allowed to fight." They accused him of cowardice, so he offered that when the German tribes attacked in the morning he would stand unarmed between the opposing sides. But the Germans melted away and disappeared during the night, so he was given his discharge.

Martin would have felt at home among the Draft Dodgers and Vietnam Veterans of the 1960s. His missionary journeys took him all over Gaul, but home for him became a retreat on the banks of the Loire where there were many caves. Mature men left positions of affluence and authority to join him, and the caves became known as the 'Great Monastery'. They ate one meal a day, drank no wine, and wore a plain outer garment of coarse homespun which was their cloak by day and their blanket at night. They tilled the fields, took care of the poor, prayed, copied the scriptures — but above all they went out as missionaries to the people. This was the model for Calum Cille's Iona, and presumably also St Ninian's Whithorn, which was specifically dedicated to Martin's memory.

It is worthwhile to stress how different Martin's model of Christianity was from that of the Romans around him. They believed in a centralised, urbanised church, a hierarchy of bishops, and in authority, orthodoxy and discipline. Martin believed in compassion and toleration, and his method of organisation was well adapted to travelling long distances and making personal contact with ordinary folk in a rural, kin-based society. He was kind where they were cruel; true Romans, they wanted to execute a Spanish bishop for heresy, while Martin risked his own life to defend him.

Martin himself was only a bishop, the story goes, because he was tricked into it. The people of Tours wanted to avail themselves of his compassion and of whatever miracles he might perform for them. A woman pretended to be seriously ill. Her husband sped off to beg Martin to come and see her. Once within the gates of Tours he was the prisoner of the crowd. They hurried him to their church, and against his own will and that of the ecclesiastical authorities, they made him their bishop. It was the sort of thing that might well happen to a 'holy fool'. Martin did not care whether he was a bishop or not; he was happy to minister to the people of the town, but insisted on living the same sort of life as before, untainted by luxury.

As a saint of Gaelic Scotland, Martin has a place to himself. No-one else is quite like him. He was not a Gael, and no-one has suggested that he came to Scotland. He does not belong to scripture, like St John or St Michael. He was not a myth from the distant east, like St George, nor a Christianised pagan deity, like St Brigid. He was, above all, the bringer of Christianity to the Celtic peoples of the Roman Empire.

Martin was equally revered in all the countries of Western Europe, including both Britain and Ireland. Proof of all this lies in the use of his name, which exists with very little variation in Scottish and Irish Gaelic, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian, Finnish and all the Scandinavian languages. To us he was both insider and outsider, for he had lived and died among the Celts before the Gael came to Scotland, and all the peoples of Scotland could claim him, like Christ, for their own.

He was certainly special to the Gael. A Gaelic Life of Calum Cille tells us that the founder of Iona "went from Derry to Martin's city of Tours, and brought back the Gospel which had been on Martin's breast in the grave for a hundred years". Cults of St Martin were widespread in Scotland. About 1185 the Register of the Great Seal records Murdac MacGillemartin, apparently a native of Carrick. Gilleroth son of Gillemartin

appears in the records of the church of Melrose. About 1507 Mertyne McGillemertyne was rector of Kilmuir in Skye; from his family, no doubt, came the Martins of Bealach and Martin Martin who has so much to tell us in his “Description of the Western Islands”, written about 1695.

In 1532 a John McGillemartyn was curate at Inverness. In 1548 a Gillemartyne McConnell Moir lived in Glenurquhart; the name *Gille Màrtainn* was particularly common among the Camerons, and was a byname for the fox. In 1662 Alexander McIlMartin was a tenant in Kelspoge in Bute. And so on.

Churches and crosses were dedicated to St Martin too. One thinks in particular of St Martin’s cross in Iona, of Kilmartin in Skye and Argyll, and of *Sgìre Mhàrtainn*, the old parish of Cullicudden in the Black Isle. But much more important than any of this was his festival on this day, and the remarkable thing is that it was entirely secular, which suggests that it was essentially non-Gaelic.

I doubt if it is coincidental that the feast of the missionary to the Celts lies just eleven days adrift of Hallowe’en, *Samhain*, the Celtic New Year. *Samhain* was the greatest event of the Celtic calendar, and I have a suspicion that it used to fall a little later in the year than it does now, and that Martinmas was invented as a Christian response to it. It is clear to me that the four term-days of Scots Law (Martinmas, Candlemas, Whitsunday and Lammas) grew out of the four Celtic quarterdays, all of which fell at the beginning of the same month (November, February, May and August). The most important — the most pagan — of the quarterdays are those of November and May, and it is precisely the November and May term-days that settled down at the greatest distance from the 1st of the month.

I will finish with a few illustrations of the nature of Martinmas in the lives of the people. Traditionally it was about cattle — stealing them, slaughtering them, or driving them to Martinmas markets. The beef was salted down for the winter. Until turnips came in as winter feed, cows were not slaughtered at any other time of year. The slaughtering was done by a smith, since he had the right instruments, and his perquisite was the head. *Cuid a’ ghobha, an ceann*: the smith’s share, the head.

There is an old story about a turbulent Mackintosh chief who decided to go and make his peace with his feudal superior, the Earl of Huntly. The Earl was not at home, but it was Martinmas, and he found his wife in the kitchen superintending the cutting and salting of the meat. He offered his head for forfeit if his kindred should misbehave again, and the lady said that if he was as good as his word he should put his head on the block. He did so, and she signed to the butcher who promptly cut his head off with his chopper.

Martinmas was also the time for the payment of rent and of debts, which I think is why there was a saying: *Cha bhi sinn dianamh dà Fhéill Màrtainn air*. “We won’t make two Martinmas of it.” In other words, we can’t have two bites of a cherry.

General Stewart of Garth told a story of an eighteenth-century shopkeeper in Glenorchy, the father of the Rev. Dr John Smith of Campbeltown, one of the translators of the Gaelic Bible. He supplied the entire district with merchandise, neither giving nor asking receipts. Every year at Martinmas he went round collecting what he was owed, and was always paid to the last penny. One year one of his customers was out when he called, but came to the shop next day before he was even out of bed. When business was done the customer said, “You are now paid. Not even for the sake of my longest-horned cow would I sleep while you waited for your money after your term of payment, or would I be the last in the country to be in your debt.”

Not that payment was necessarily in cash. Going back a bit, in 1224-31 Fearchar Earl of Ross granted two davachs of land to Walter of Moray for the annual rent of a pound of pepper at the Feast of St Martin. The pepper would have come in handy for spicing the meat newly slaughtered. In 1596 Sir Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy granted land to his third son for a yearly payment of £10 Scots, a gallon of whisky, and a fine-coloured tartan plaid at Martinmas, along with *cuid oidhche* — a night’s hospitality — whenever required.

Rents in Caithness came to be called “Mertimas debt and tallow silver”, meaning apparently that the tenant drove a head or two of cattle to a merchant in Wick or Thurso. The merchant credited the laird, who credited the tenant; a Brabster rental for 1697 shows that this system usually resulted in a balance of cash in the tenant’s favour. I take it that “tallow silver” refers not to money but to the candlegrease obtained from the slaughtered beasts, which sounds like as good a currency as any. Money to burn!

In more recent history, however, when rents arched far higher than income, the name of Martinmas became loathsome. It was at Martinmas that the Rev. Donald Sage removed from his mission station at Achness on hearing that his entire congregation were to be cleared. As Robert Somers wrote in 1848 of the newly-created fishing villages of Janetown, Plockton and Dornie, “Alone in their misery, they are equally unique in their rise, progress, and decline . . . On some fatal Martinmas or Whitsunday term, the forefathers of these wretched villagers were hunted out from the glens, and pressed together in crowds on barren stripes along the margins of the lochs.”

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