

## The Celtic Olympics

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THINKING of Scotland as a whole, what evidence do we have for fairs and markets before the twelfth century? What evidence do we have for fairs and markets of Gaelic, or other Celtic, origin?

I formulated these questions in my last article, and finished by suggesting a checklist for investigating them. On the checklist are: certain placenames; dedications to Celtic saints; fairs held on Celtic quarterdays; early grants referring to existing fairs; fairs with strong non-commercial elements; fairs with strange-sounding names. I will look at the first three of these items now, and the other three next time.

We know that the ancient Celts had great hill-top gatherings for law-making and other purposes. Julius Caesar tells us for example that the tribes of Gaul met for this purpose at a place in the territory of the Carnutes. In early medieval Ireland such gatherings took place (usually on certain quarterdays, every third year or so) on hilltop sites at Tara, Tlachtga, Tailtiu, Cruachan, Carman, Nenagh and other places. As with the Greeks and their Olympiad, a great deal went on besides law-making. There were judgements, political discussions, religious observances, entertainments, feats of arms, horse-racing, sports — and trading.

Our most graphic source for all this is a Gaelic poem on the fair (*aonach*) of Carman, which is at Wexford in south-east Ireland. I have quoted it before on this page, so suffice to say now that it portrays a market with three clear divisions — foodstuffs, livestock and luxury goods.

So do we know of anything like this in Gaelic Scotland? No, we do not, but we can look for places bearing the name *aonach*, just as does Nenagh (*an tAonach*) in Ireland. Actually it has two meanings in Scotland: not just a market-place, but a mountain plateau, as in *an t-Aonach Eagach*, ‘the Notched Plateau’, above Glencoe. Watson points to five instances of it as ‘market-place’ in his “Celtic Place-Names of Scotland”. One is *Taigh an Aonaich*, Teaninich or ‘the House of the Market-Place’, at Alness, which gave its name to a distillery and so to a malt whisky. Another is *an t-Aonach*, the name of a fine flat field on Drummond Farm near Evanton, formerly the site of a market. Then there is *Blàr an Aonaich* in Strathpeffer, Blairninich or ‘the Market Ground’.

These three market-places are within a couple of hundred yards or so of the parish churches of Alness, Kiltarn and Fodderty respectively; this establishes a pattern which can be looked for elsewhere. Watson’s fourth instance is *Aonachan*, presumably meaning ‘Little Market Place’ on the south side of the Spean in Lochaber; Spean Bridge nearby is *Drochaid Aonachain* in Gaelic. *Aonachan* doesn’t fit the pattern, but comes very close to it, because the parish church of Kilmonivaig faces it just a mile away across the river. Was the original *Aonach*, as opposed to *Aonachan*, close to the church on the north side of the river?

Watson’s fifth is just a quote from a *port à beul* — *Gobhainn Druim an Aonaich*, ‘the Smith of Market Ridge’. Does anybody know where this is, please?

Another Gaelic element to look for is *comhdhail*, ‘an assembly’. Professor Geoffrey Barrow published a list of 56 placenames which seem to contain this element in an article called ‘Popular Courts in Early Medieval Scotland’ in volume 25 of “Scottish Studies” (1981). With one exception (*Clach na Còmhalaiach* at Achiltibuie) the places are all in the eastern half of Scotland, and Professor Barrow bases his understanding of the term on a passage in a Latin contract of 4 April 1329 between the Abbot of Arbroath and a certain Fergus son of Duncan: “Fergus and his heir shall have the court which is called Couthal for the men residing within the said land, to deal with the countless acts arising amongst themselves only, and they shall have the fines arising therefrom.”

So Barrow sees the *comhdhail* as a court for mediating local disputes, and indeed he points out that there hardly ever seems to be more than one *comhdhail* per parish; this suggests that each parish had its ancient meeting-place. Moreover, a great many of these meeting-sites were on hills, resulting in names like Cuttlehill, Cult Hill, Coleduns, Cothiemuir and so on. But I think it would accord with the Celtic style of doing things if such land-courts also went hand in hand with activities like games and markets. One thinks of the Carman poem, where a stanza on legal functions is sandwiched between lines on horseracing and foodstuffs. “They would hold seven races, for a glorious object, seven days in the week. There they would discuss with strife of speech the dues and tributes of the province, every legal enactment was settled right piously every third year. Corn, milk, peace, happy ease, full nets, ocean’s plenty . . .”

So we must look for evidence linking *comhdhail* names with fairs. I have two examples. One is Cockhill Fair at Callander on 16 May, a major event in the Highland drover’s year. The drovers enjoyed the extraordinary privilege of grazing their cattle free of charge for the week previous to the fair, over the whole area of Cockhill, which was very fine grazing. The origin of the privilege was unknown in 1890, and it all suggests a meeting-ground of great antiquity.

Then there is Cuff Hill in the parish of Beith, Ayrshire, where a fair was held every St Inan’s Day, 18 August. The fair was moved into Beith itself when the town had increased in population and become a more suitable place for a market. Cuff Hill bears all the marks of having been a sacred site in the days when Gaelic was spoken in Cunninghame North. It has a cleft in the rock called St Inan’s Chair, while not far away there is, or was, a well of excellent water called St Inan’s Well — *Suidhe Fhionain* and *Tobar Fhionain*, no doubt.

This brings us into the second item in our checklist. There are, or were, fairs all over Scotland bearing the names of Celtic saints. The last of these was Dubhthach of Tain, who died in 1065. During the century or so after that, the Roman Catholic authorities gained a firm grip on the Scottish church and began to ensure that new dedications were to approved saints like Peter, Paul, Andrew, Mary, Margaret or Catherine. So if a fair is named after a Celtic saint like Patrick, Brigid, Columba, Finan, Maolrubha or Dubhthach, it is reasonable to guess that it rose naturally out of commercial transactions between people visiting the church, chair, well, shrine or tomb of such a saint, and that it developed gradually from the date of the saint's death, or at least from the date of the first miracle ascribed to him or her at that place. The *Féill Dubhthaich* at Tain was first mentioned in a charter of 1588, so we can date its development from 1065 to 1588. St Columba died in 597, but his relics were not transferred from Iona to Dunkeld until the time of Viking attacks about 800; his great fair at Dunkeld, the *Féill Chaluim Chille*, is on record from 1512, so we should assign its development to the years 800-1512.

Finally, the Celtic quarterdays of St Brigid's (1 February), Beltane (1 May), Lammas (1 August) and Samhain (1 November) are of great antiquity, so fairs on these days are worth an extra look. To go back to a convenient early source for a few examples, James Smith's "Exact Dealer's Companion" of 1727 lists 'Belton Fair' at Montrose, Kinnocher and Peebles, in addition to 'Lammas Day in Atturff, Melross, Innerkeithing, St Andrews, Dumbartoun' and 'Lammas Day at Kirkwal in Orkney, lasting seven Days'.

Tracing a couple of these back, a charter of 1512 granted Turriff in Aberdeenshire a public fair 'at the feast of St Peter, called Lammas'. The Beltane Fair at Peebles does not seem to be on public record before 1621, when a charter of Queen Mary grants the town a fair 'on 3rd May, called Beltane day', yet the poem "Peblis to the Play" by King James I (1394-1437) describes the journey of some country people to Peebles to take part in Beltane celebrations there. Young girls get out their best clothes before setting off; groups begin to arrive, singing or proceeded by a piper; boys and girls pair away to enjoy the games and the dancing. Two men get into a fight over the bill in a tavern, the brawl then spilling into the street. A nearby carter is drawn in and is soundly beaten until pulled out of the gutter by his wife. Coming to, he declares that he doesn't know what it was — "I wait nocht weil what it wes, / My awn gray meir that kest me, / Or gif I wes forfochtin faint / And syne lay down to rest me, / Yonder / Of Peblis to the play."

The worst offenders are clapped into the stocks, but good humour is restored when someone strikes up a tune on the pipes; everyone dances until it is time to say farewell until the next feast day. Clearly King James enjoyed the annual pilgrimage to the Church of the Holy Cross (or Holy Rood) at Peebles, but we can dig deeper than that. Beltane was Christianised as the Feast of the Holy Cross, 3 May, so it seems that the Church of the Holy Cross was established (in 1261) in response to existing May Day (Beltane) rituals. The same would have been true of Holyrood in Edinburgh. The evidence of Peeblesshire placenames suggests that Gaelic lingered long in the county — perhaps, at a guess, to around 1261, with accompanying traditions surviving to King James's time. Such traditions clearly included the enthusiastic celebration of Beltane.

We can take things a step further back still, to a time in the early Middle Ages when Peeblesshire was Celtic but not Gaelic, for the name Peebles is Cumbric (Welsh) *Pebyllau* and means 'tents', that is, shieling bothies. Beltane is in its very origin the time when cattle were brought up to the shieling pastures, so the connection between Peebles and Beltane can be shown to be intimate in every way. I have of necessity done it backwards, but I think I have made the point that a fair attached to a quarterday may turn out to have its roots in something very old.

I suppose I have also shown that it takes a long time for those connected with a great religious or sporting event to acknowledge that its commercial aspect has become the most important thing about it. See Christmas? See the Olympic Games?

— WHFP 20.1.95