

On quarterdays and communions

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

AS WE passed the spring quarterday this week — St Brigid’s Day or *Latha Fhéill Brighde*, 1 February — I thought I would have a closer look at some of the old Scottish fairs that fell on these ancient Celtic festivals, to see if they could really have been taking place since before Christianity even came to our land.

The best way of doing this is to use Sir James Marwick’s “List of Markets and Fairs now and formerly held in Scotland” of 1890. Marwick was Town Clerk of Glasgow and I believe a founding member of the Scottish Record Society, and his book is a wonderful compilation of information from early documents and from contemporary informants all over the country in the 1880s, arranged alphabetically by place.

There are not many St Brigid’s Fairs, simply because of the time of year! But the few that there are certainly seem old. Logie Wester near Dingwall was in Gaelic *Lagaidh Bhrighde* or St Brigid’s Hollow, and it had a St Brigid’s Fair which was moved into Inverness at some point before 1592. It kept the name of its birthplace, though, and in funny spellings like ‘Legavrick’ and ‘Legrievrike’ and ‘Legraweik’ it is mentioned in a royal charter of 1592 and an Act of Parliament of 1641.

Other places where St Brigid’s Day fairs are on record as early as 1727 are Forres, Blair Athol and Abernethy. If we also include Candlemas fairs (2 February), as I think we may, the list extends to Dingwall, Banff, Methlick in Aberdeenshire, Dunkeld and Rattray in Perthshire, Cupar in Fife and Douglas in Lanarkshire — not to mention a Candlemas Fair at Kinloss in Morayshire which is on record from 1497. All of these except Douglas are north of the Forth-Clyde line, which suggests that the keeping of Candlemas, thanks to its connection with St Brigid’s, was more of a Highland custom than a Lowland one.

Moving to Beltane (1 May), we have a lovely crop of early references — Kilmun in Argyll 1490, Kirkcudbright 1509, Pitlessie in Fife 1541, Peebles in 1608 (although it is much older than that, as I showed last time), Kilconquhar in Fife 1609, Rothiemay in Banffshire 1617, Gartmore in Stirlingshire 1681, Moybeg in Strathdearn 1669. These include not just Beltane itself, varying from 1 to 5 May, but the feasts of SS Philip and James (1 May) and of the Finding of the Holy Cross (3 May).

I would be particularly interested to know more about the fair at Tullybelton in Perthshire, because Tullybelton in Gaelic is *Tulach Bealltainn*, Beltane Hillock. All I know at the moment is that, according to the “New Statistical Account” of 1845, ‘an annual fair or market was once held on the banks of the Ordie, at a place called the Hole of Tullybelton, a beautiful dell, at which many Highlanders attended to sell wool, cheese and butter, and other produce of their land and industry’. Was it held at Beltane?

There are many fairs around Lammas (*Lùnastal*, 1 August) which look old. Some are on record from an early date — Fettercairn in Kincardineshire 1504, Merton in Berwickshire 1504, Newburgh in Aberdeenshire 1509, Turriff 1512, Stonehaven 1567, Stranraer 1595, Dumbarton 1600, St Andrews 1614, Melrose 1621, Torphichen 1669, Finhaven in Angus 1686. Some may be disguised by dedications to St Peter ad Vincula or St Peter’s Chains (1 August), St Margaret (31 July) or possibly even St James (25 July).

A number are on hilltop sites, thus fulfilling an important criterion for *Lùnastal* survivals cited by Máire MacNeill in her great book *Festival of Lughnasa*. Examples of this for investigation would be the Lammas Fairs on the Hill of Invermarkie in Aberdeenshire (on record from 1669) and on the top of a range of hills to the north-east of Lockerbie, mentioned in 1845. Also worth noting is St James’s Fair on the Hill of Garvoch in Kincardineshire, the dues for which were paid ‘immemorially’ to a Mr Scott of Commiston even though the ground belonged to the Earl of Kintore. Finally the Burryman Fair at South Queensferry, where a man is led around covered from head to toe in burrs from the burr thistle or burdock, is worth keeping an eye on in this context, because it is a St James’ Day festival. It was described in 1845 as having been observed ‘from time immemorial’.

Likely survivals of *Samhain* (1 November), whose eve is Hallowe’en, come disguised as All Saints, All-Hallows, or Hallowmas, and we should probably also include the Feast of the Apostles Simon and Jude (28 October) and of St Tallerican (30 October). Early references include Edinburgh 1447, Falkland in Fife 1458, Fordyce in Banffshire 1499, Fortrose 1592, Innerroy in Lochaber 1669, Strathblane 1670, and the Burn of Scoulag in Bute 1681. The All-Hallow Fair in the Grassmarket in Edinburgh about 1800 is the subject of a print which was reproduced in A R B Haldane’s great book *The Drove Roads of Scotland*.

The fair held on the first Wednesday of November at Kilwinning in Ayrshire was called Ball’s Day or Bell’s Day. Why, I wonder? Perhaps most interesting however is the Fair of Hill at Lochwinnoch in Renfrewshire, held on the first Tuesday of November. The “New Statistical Account” says that it was the oldest of the three Lochwinnoch fairs and had been held from time immemorial. It took place originally on the Market Hill, from which it took its name, and was then transferred to the village.

Now we can turn to places which boasted fairs on **more** than one of the Celtic quarterdays. Going from north to south, Kildrummy in Aberdeenshire had fairs at St Brigid’s, Lammas and All Saints, two of them on record from 1593. Stonehaven had Candlemas and Lammas fairs. In 1890 Shian in Glenquoich, Perthshire,

had fairs at Beltane and *Samhain*. Note the name Shian, *Sithein*, a fairy mound, which suggests a very ancient sacred site.

Falkland in Fife had important fairs at All Saints and Lammas, on record from 1458 and 1595 respectively, and the “New Statistical Account” tells us that ‘these markets were held at one time upon the Lomond Hills, but of late years they have been held alternately in the streets of Falkland and in a small commony adjoining the town’. In precisely the same way, Redding in Stirlingshire had fairs at All Saints and Lammas, both held out in the hills. In 1672 an Act of Parliament authorises a yearly fair on the last Wednesday of October at the Redding, ‘in a moorish place within the barony of Polmont’. And in 1890 Marwick tells us about the Wallacestone Fair on 2 August — it took place on a hill beyond Redding which was named for a stone said to have marked the spot from where Wallace watched the Battle of Falkirk.

But cumulatively the evidence from the far south-west is the most impressive of all. Maybole in Carrick seems to have had the full set, at least as long as Carrick was still Gaelic-speaking — Lammas 1516, Candlemas 1599, Beltane and All Hallows 1672. So did Sanquhar in Dumfriesshire, except that you have to peer through a disguise all the time — in 1484 we have St James and SS Simon and Jude, which are close to Lammas and *Samhain*, then 1693 an Act of Parliament simply authorises a free fair there on the first Thursday of every quarter. It is rather as if all pretence is being given up at last.

Similarly, by 1794 Thornhill in Dumfriesshire had fairs on the second Tuesday of February, May, August and November. And by 1661 Whithorn in Wigtonshire had fairs on 30 July and 1 November. What all this suggests to me is that, thanks to surviving Celtic influence of a kind we know very little about, the people of the south-west remained particularly devoted to their ancient quarterdays. Or to put it another way, perhaps it was by clinging to the quarterdays that they remembered their roots.

Next time I will turn to fairs with strong non-commercial elements and strange-sounding names, but I would like to finish this time by showing how the imagery of the fair came in post-Reformation times to be woven into the fabric of religious thought, at least in Gaelic.

Firstly, the communion season was often spoken of by the godly as a *féill* or fair. So for example when James Mackay of Proncy in Dornoch came back from a communion at Tain where the Rev. Dr John MacDonald of Ferintosh was preaching, he said, *Chaidh mi gu Baile Dhubhthaich dhan fhéill agus nuair a ràinig mi bha lain a’ pìobaireachd, ’s cha b’ fhada nach robh mi fhìn san ruidhle*. ‘I went to the fair at Tain and when I got there John was piping, and in no time I had joined in the reel.’ MacDonald, the ‘Apostle of the North’, had been a piper in his youth.

Next, the so-called ‘tent’ from which the minister preached at outdoor communions was in Gaelic *bùth*, from English ‘booth’ — the same word that would be used of a market stall or shop. In the early days of communions the tent might be a few oars in the form of a cone, covered with blankets, with a fixed board in front to hold the Bible. Later it would be purpose-built of dressed timber. Finally there was the Lord’s Table, which led people to talk of entering the *seòmar aoidheachd* or hospitality room, just as might be done to cement a bargain on market day.

Now a couple of anecdotes to emphasise the point. The first concerns a pious man called William Main, known as Willie Teetee, who lived at Ardersier in the parish of Petty during the ministry of the Rev. John Morrison (the ‘Petty Seer’, 1701-74). Willie was once walking to the communions at Inverness, and somewhere between Castle Stuart and Lonnie Mr Morrison came riding by on his shaggy pony, on his way to assist at the same event. ‘Where are you going?’ asked the minister.

‘I am told there is to be a market in that big town to the west,’ replied Willie, ‘and I have got a lot of coppers that I want to get rid of. I am also told that a man will attend at the market who will be glad to give me good valid coinage for my worthless coppers, and I am going to strike a bargain with him.’ By which he meant, of course, that he was going to communion in Inverness with his sins, and that Christ would be there to exchange them for grace.

This answer pleased Morrison so much that he got off his horse and told Willie to mount in his place, saying, ‘Willie Teetee, you are far more worthy of having a horse to carry you than I am.’ So the saint got on the horse and the minister walked at his side all the way to Inverness.

Then there is a story about Tormad mac Shomhairle, one of the saints of Harris in the 19th century. He was once asked, *A Thormaid, nach eil òrain dìomhain idir agaibh?* ‘Don’t you have any secular songs at all?’

He replied, ‘I did at one time but on the great day of the Lord’s grace they were spoiled on me (*chaidh am milleadh orm*) and anyway, at the fair I am going to, I wouldn’t get a penny for them.’

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