

## The Féill Éiteachain at Ardgay

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

EVERY year about this time an annual market used to be held at Ardgay in Easter Ross. Ardgay *used* to be in Easter Ross at any rate; it has now been brought into Sutherland, to which it has been linked by the Bonar Bridge since 1812.

The name of the market was the *Féill Éiteachain*. That is how it was spelt by Professor W J Watson, probably Scotland's most distinguished placenames scholar ever, who came from Boath a few miles south over the Struie. It was still being held in 1924, when Watson mentions it in a little book called 'Ross and Cromarty'.

Going back a little further, the 'New Statistical Account' of the parish of Kincardine, published about 1840 and followed in 1855 by a work on the Highland parishes called 'Origines Parochiales Scotiae', declared that "there is a fair called Feille-Edeichan held at Kincardine in the end of November or beginning of December". Kincardine is a mile south of Ardgay along the shore of the Dornoch Firth, and that is where the name *Éiteachan* really belongs, because Kincardine lies at the foot of a river called the *Allt Éiteachain*, or in an old Ordnance Survey map *Allt na h-Éiteig*.

It was only after the building of the Bonar Bridge that Ardgay, being closer to the bridge-end, began to increase its population at the expense of the ancient focal point of the parish. A picture of the situation before the bridge was built is given by the 'Old Statistical Account' of the 1790s, which tells us that the parish of Kincardine "has but one fair. It holds in the last week of November. There is commonly a fine shew of Highland cows, fattened on the best heath, and whose beef is allowed to be of the first flavour and taste."

The legend of the *Féill Éiteachain* concerns a certain quartz stone whose name is given by Watson as *Clach Éiteag*. The custom, says Watson in his 'Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty' (1904), was that the market was held wherever this stone happened to be at the time. "The stone was sometimes shifted west by the Assynt men, and east by the men of Ross, but finally it was built into the wall of the present Balnagown Arms Hotel at Ardgay, and so the market has ever since been held there. I give the story for what it is worth. Ma's breug bhuan e, is breug thugam e." By which Watson means of course that if he tells a lie, it is only because that's how he heard it.

Clearly the stone was built into the wall of the Balnagown Arms Hotel at some point between 1855 and 1904. As for the story of the Assynt connection, it is a persistent one. The way Mary Beith heard it is that it was from Assynt that the quartz block had come in the first place. Frank MacLennan, in his book 'Ferindonald Papers', gives a very circumstantial version: "Apart from the regular, all-the-year-round traffic, crowds would gather in from all sides to the Feill Eiteachan, the winter market which was held at Kincardine for a year or two and then at Ardgay, after the famous stone, now placed in a prominent position in the village, was brought from the Sutherland side towards the end of the 18th century. The market, now a thing of the past, used to be held wherever the stone might be."

But how important is the stone to the name of the fair? We have a river, a fair and a stone all bearing the same name, more or less — that is, *Éiteag* for the river and the stone, *Éiteachan* for the river and the fair. What can we make of it all?

Well, Watson thought that they were separate. He took the river name from a word *éiteach* meaning the root of burnt heather, and suggested that the name of the market was based upon that. Then he added: "But *éiteachan* cannot be based on *éiteag*, which is a loan word from English *hectic* (Macbain)."

The reference is to Alexander Macbain's etymological Gaelic dictionary, which gives *éiteag* as a "white pebble, precious stone; from English *hectic*, lapis *hecticus*, the white hectic stone, used as a remedy against dysentery and diarrhoea". Macbain, in turn, gives a reference to Martin Martin's 'Description of the Western Islands of Scotland', which turns out to be this description of the Hectic Stone as used in Skye: "The Lapis Hecticus, or white Hectick Stone, abounds here both in the land and water: the natives use this stone as a remedy against the dysentery and diarrhea; they make them red-hot in the fire, and then quench them in milk, and some in water, which they drink with good success. They use this stone after the same manner for consumptions, and they likewise quench these stones in water, with which they bathe their feet and hands."

Now, we have traced the fair back to what I am sure was its origin at the parish church of Kincardine. It would be usual for an old fair to bear the name of the saint to whom the church was dedicated. To whom was the parish church of Kincardine dedicated? Was it a saint bearing some name like *Éiteag* or *Éiteachan*?

The quick answer to this question is that neither 'Origines Parochiales Scotiae' nor any other book provides any such information. The slow answer involves looking at the date of the fair to see what saint is associated with that particular time of year. Our fair was clearly held in the last week of November, Old Style, which became a date in the beginning of December once the New Style calendar was firmly adopted in the nineteenth century; indeed, Marwick's 'List of Fairs and Markets' of 1890 states clearly under 'Kincardine' that the fair was held on the 3rd Tuesday after 1 November, Old Style, i.e. the 3rd Tuesday after 13 November in the modern calendar. And this provides us with an answer, albeit not a very convenient one.

November 25 was the feast-day of St Catherine of Alexandria. Catherine, according to legend, was a virgin who suffered martyrdom for her faith in the 4th century A.D. First they tried to break her on a revolving spiked wheel, hence the name of the firework; finally she was decapitated, her veins spouting milk instead of blood. Her cult was tremendously popular in the Middle Ages, and seems to have focused in Scotland on the name 'Carden'. Kincardine in the Mearns, like our Ross-shire Kincardine, bore an old Gaelic name which was in part ultimately Pictish — *ceann* 'end' and *cardainn* 'a wood or thicket', from a Pictish word resembling Old Welsh *cardden* — but clearly no-one mentioned this to the town council of Kincardine in 1540 when it proclaimed annual fairs dedicated to St Catherine of Siena (on 30 April) and to St Catherine the Virgin (on 20 November).

Again, there is evidence of a cult of St Catherine on the Sutherland coast just north of our Kincardine — around 1630 both Golspie and Loth had fairs called St Carden's Fair. Taking these two pieces of evidence together, it seems highly likely that a place near Golspie which bore the name Kincardine and boasted a fair in the last week of November must have had a church dedicated to St Catherine.

This theory still leaves unanswered the question of why the fair should be called not *Féill Chatrìona* but *Féill Éiteachain*. It is a difficult question, but I imagine it must have to do with the stone. I think I would reject Watson's 'root of burnt heather' idea, and suggest that the stone had healing powers very like Martin Martin's *lapis hecticus*. This would indicate a good reason why the men of Assynt, Sutherland and Ross would all want to claim it, and why people would flock to it wherever it was set up. By this theory, *éiteag* and *éiteachan* derive either from the word 'hectic' or from the name of some Celtic saint whose cult preceded that of St Catherine at Kincardine; in any event, it would have been the saint's power that gave the charm its efficacy, and I suspect that it was used by being dipped in the water of *Allt Éiteachain* or *Allt na h-Éiteig* which flows by the church, the water being thus made curative, and the river named after the saint or the stone.

It is interesting, I think, that *éiteag* came to be a word for — as Dwelly says — not just a white pebble, or white quartz, or a precious stone, but for a 'fair maid'. *Fhuair mi 'n éiteag mar mhnaoi*, says one of our poets, I forget who — 'I got the *éiteag* for a wife'. Could it be a kenning for St Catherine the Virgin, perhaps?

That the *Féill Éiteachain* is ancient there is no doubt, even if our sources for it are comparatively modern. In his book 'Echoes of the Glen', Colin MacDonald from Strathpeffer (1882-1957) gives it a very antique flavour indeed. "*Feill Éidechan*," he says, "was originally the special market at which the women bought ribbons and laces and such finer articles of apparel as they could not weave at home, and at which the men got themselves properly equipped with the 'harness of war' — body armour, shirts of mail, etc. — for the purveying of which the smiths and armourers were in attendance and did a roaring trade. But *Feill Éideachan* had lost all its original significance long before my time."

The Rev. Donald Sage tells in his book 'Memorabilia Domestica' of how Patrick Sellar issued the first eviction notices to clear Kildonan and Strathnaver for sheep in November 1818. Just seven years after the Bonar Bridge was built, there is little doubt that the market he refers to at Ardgay is the *Féill Éiteachain*. "Having myself, in common with the rest of my people, received one of these notices, I resolved that, at the ensuing term of Martinmas, I would remove from Achness, and go once more permanently to reside under my father's roof, although I would, at the same time, continue the punctual discharge of my pastoral duties among the people till they also should be removed. I could not but regard the summoning of the minister as tantamount to the putting down of the ministration of the word and ordinances of religion in that part of the country. And, indeed, it is a fact that, although this desolate district is still occupied by shepherds, no provision has, since that time, been made for their spiritual wants. I left Achness, therefore, about the middle of November, 1818, sold my cow at the Ardgay market, and got my furniture conveyed to Kildonan by my father's horses and my own."

I will end on a more cheerful note however, a story told by Frank MacIannan which links the *Féill Éiteachain* with Evanton and is still current in the latter village, or was until recently. "Just about a hundred years ago," says MacIannan — he is writing between 1963 and 1976 — "one of our Evanton coopers approached the carter, Donald Munro, for the loan of his horse and cart to convey a load of tubs and cogs to the market.

"Donald — he was best known as Donald Chrink, to distinguish him among the dozen or score of other Donald Munros in the parish — willingly placed Sally, the mare, and the cart at the disposal of the cooper. Away over the Struie they went on a fine December morning. Trade was good. With but two tubs unsold, and pleasantly heavy pockets, the cooper thought he had done well enough. He bought six sheep's heads, which he put into the cart with the tubs. He yoked Sally, and, ready to start for home, felt that a dram would fortify him for the journey. He went into either the Balnagown Arms, or one of the refreshment tents. Over the dram he chatted with others, told them somewhat of himself, very likely bragged a bit about that young son of his recently gone to Glasgow, who was doing so well there. And so another dram, and another dram.

"When he came out his mind was far away from Sally and the long dark journey over the Struie. He cheerfully walked over to the nearby station, bought a ticket for Glasgow, and in came the train. And when he reached the great city, he had a dram — had he more than one? — before he sought out Finlay in the workshop. It was Finlay himself who brought back to Evanton later, that his father's first words to him were, 'Have you seen anything of Donald Chrink's mare Sally?'

"There was consternation in Evanton. Search parties took the road to Ardgay. A man missing! A mare missing! A wife and family in a state! Donald Chrink too in a state! A telegram from Glasgow put the mind of the family at rest. Donald's anxiety lasted longer. But Sally the mare had a good head on her. She knew the road home. She made her way leisurely. Next day she was found in the neighbourhood of Stittenham, with the cart, the two tubs, the six sheep's heads, all in good order."

— WHFP 24.11.95