

Candle Day in February

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I WAS asked recently if I could shed some light on a short list of traditional festivals in that wonderful autobiography by Angus Campbell (Am Puilean) called ‘Suathadh ri iomadh Rubha’, published in 1973. I got stuck on one, *Latha a’ Chuilinn*, but as it turns out to be a February festival, I think it will be a good idea to present the list here.

The Puilean lived from 1903 to 1982 and was a native of Swanibost in Ness. He had an extremely eventful life as a soldier and a sailor. He had an independent mind and an inexhaustible fund of stories. I was privileged to know him when he was in his sixties, before either of his books were published. As a poet (*Moll is Cruithneachd*) he was good, but it is with that prizewinning autobiography of his that he really made his mark. In a way it is not merely the story of Angus Campbell, Am Puilean, but the history of the Gael in the twentieth century. It is a smashing good read.

At page 46 the Puilean says this. *Bha bhliadhna air a bristeadh sìos ’na mìrean beag is mór.* (The year was broken down into pieces large and small.) *Bha na faoilteach gheamhraidh is earraich, Féill-Mhàrtainn, Féill-Phàdrùig, Féill-Bhrìghde, agus Féill-Dòmhnach.* (There were the winter and spring wolftimes, Martinmas, St Patrick’s, St Brigid’s, and Sunday Fair.) *Bha an t-Iuchar, an t-Samhainn ’s an Nollaig.* (There were the Iuchar, Samhain and Christmas.)

Bha mòran làithean agus oidhcheannan sonraichte aca mach air a sin, mar a bha Dì-luain Traoight, Latha Màrtainn-Builg, Latha a’ Chuilinn, Sàbaid na Càisg, Latha Buidhe Bealltainn, Oidhche Shamhna, Oidhche Challuinn agus mòran eile. (In addition to these they had many special days and nights, such as Troit Monday, St Martin of Bullion’s Day, *Latha a’ Chuilinn*, Easter Sunday, Yellow Beltane Day, Hallowe’en, Hogmanay and many more.) *Bha breithneachadh na h-aimsir iomchaidh agus na comharraidhean a bha toirt rabhadh dhaibh roimh-làimh air atharrachadh na tìde.* (The shifting seasons were judged accordingly as were the signs that warned them in advance of a change in the weather.)

The Puilean set us a test here. When were each of these festivals? Sixteen out of sixteen if you get them all correct. It was certainly a test for John Murray from Barvas, who was Editorial Officer of the Gaelic Books Council at the time and editor of the book. He must have scored 12 out of 16, because he got back to the Puilean and asked him to explain four of them, the answers duly going into explanatory notes at the end of the book.

All of the sixteen except *Latha a’ Chuilinn* have also been explained on this page at one time or another over the last ten years, so I’ll run quickly through the answers, quoting Murray (in translation only) in the case of the four which he covers.

The winter and spring wolftimes were periods of windy weather, each expected to last two or three weeks, lying on either side of St Brigid’s Day. So we are currently in the middle (Old Style) or at the end (New Style) of the spring wolftime. If the weather is cold and windy, that is how it should be, and it bodes well for the rest of the year.

Martinmas is 11 November New Style, 22-24 November Old Style.

St Patrick’s Day is 17 March New Style, 28-30 March Old Style.

St Brigid’s Day is 1 February New Style, 12-14 February Old Style. We can wave a last goodbye to it now.

On the *Féill-Dòmhnach* I wrote a piece on 3 March last year called ‘The strange story of Sunday markets’. Murray: “The author says this is not any particular festival, but fair-days that were kept on a Sunday, such as the Easter Sunday Fair (*Féill-Dòmhnach Càisg*) or the Whitsun Sunday Fair (*Féill-Dòmhnach Caingis*).”

The *Iuchar* or Bordertime was a period lying two or three weeks before *Latha Lùnastail* (1 August New Style, 12-14 August Old Style) and two or three weeks after it. So there was a *iuchar samhraidh* (summer bordertime) and a *iuchar foghair* (autumn bordertime). Nowadays it is the month of July.

Samhain is the winter quarterday (1 November New Style, 12-14 November Old Style).

Nollaig is Christmas (25 December New Style, 5-7 January Old Style).

I wrote about *Dì-luain Traoight* here on 11 January 1991. Murray: “The author says this is the first Monday after the New Year, Old Style (*anns an t-seann chunntas*). The man of the house would not go to bed until he had ascertained the direction the wind was blowing at midnight, for it was believed that it would blow in that direction for most of the year, *mar laogh gu mhàthair ag iarraidh chun na h-àirde seo* — seeking that airt like a calf to its mother. This is the day called in Scotland Handsel Monday or Auld Handsel Monday — a day off for people who worked on the land, on which some went round the neighbourhood begging as guisers, rather like the Hogmanay gangs. The word *traoight* or *trait* means rags, ragged clothes.”

I don’t think that final speculation is right, I believe the word comes from ‘treat’ and therefore means the same as ‘handsel’. The wind custom, like the guising one, had clearly got detached from Hogmanay, where it usually belongs.

I wrote about St Martin of Bullion’s day here on 14 July 1989. Murray: “In English, St Swithin’s Day, 15 July.” Yes, St Martin of Bullion’s Day was 4 July New Style, 15-17 July Old Style, and it was believed in the Highlands that whatever weather prevailed on *Latha Màrtainn Builg* would predominate for the next forty days or so. I believe there was a saying something like this: *Ma bheir am fiadh a chuinn tioram gus an laigh a’ ghrian air an latha seo, bidh a’ chiad chuid den fhoghar tioram.* “If the deer keeps his antlers dry until the sun sets on this day, the first part of the harvest will be dry.”

Yellow Beltane Day is 1 May, or 12-14 May Old Style, while Easter Sunday, Hallowe'en and Hogmanay need no explanation, so that leaves just *Latha a' Chuilinn*, which sounds as if it means 'Holly Day', from *cuileann*, 'holly'. Murray: "3 February. It is still customary to hang holly in houses at Christmastime, though nobody leaves it in till as late as St Brigid's today!"

The crucial thing here is the date, which points to Candlemas. Candlemas is actually 2 February, the day following St Brigid's, but confusion grew up in the Highlands concerning the date of these festivals. Candlemas, 2 February, was a Scots Law term-day, but in Gaelic it was usually called *Latha Fhéill Brighde*. Dwelly himself fell victim to this confusion, so that if you look up *féill-Bride* in his dictionary you will find one meaning and one meaning only — Candlemas.

Fifteen years ago, when still very much a tyro in such matters, I mentioned *Latha Fhéill Brighde* as Candlemas in a column about Gaelic which I had going in 'The Scotsman' at the time. I was of course simply following Dwelly, whom I believed to be infallible. (Nowadays I believe him to be *nearly* infallible. The man was amazing.)

I was put right in the course of a most courteous letter (dated 14 March 1981) which remains one of my most prized possessions. It was from the parish priest of Dufftown in Banffshire, a Gaelic learner, and this is what he had to say on that particular point. "In your 'Seall Seo' piece today, as in one some weeks ago (I forget when), you refer to *Latha Fhéill Brighde* as 'Candlemas Day': last time, it simply puzzled me; this time, I see you refer to Candlemas Day as February **1st** — and all becomes clear. For Candlemas Day is and always has been on the **2nd** (originally an independent penitential procession, a 'demo' against the pagan Romans!, later linked to the celebration of the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple). St Brigid's day, on the other hand, certainly was and is the **1st**, presumably the day of her death, or 'heavenly birthday', at her abbey of Kildare. I wonder if you have some particular reason (local variant, perhaps) for conflating the two days."

If St Brigid's was identified by Gaelic speakers like Dwelly and the Puilean as 2 February, and Candlemas was known to follow it, then of course Candlemas got pushed back to 3 February. And what of the name *Latha a' Chuilinn*? Well, it has nothing to do with holly at all. Candlemas proper is in Gaelic *Latha Coinnle* (Candle Day) or *Latha Fhéill Moire nan Coinnlean* (the Feast of St Mary of the Candles). This was the feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, performed (in accordance with Mosaic law, Lev. xii) forty days after the birth of her child on the night of 24 December; in Celtic lands like ours it came to be believed that Brigid walked before Mary at her purification bearing a lighted candle in each hand, these candles representing the lamb and the pigeon (the burnt offering and the sin offering) ordained for sacrifice at purification by Lev. xii: 6.

Dwelly gives *coilinn* as a variant of *coinneal*, a candle. That means that the Puilean's *Latha a' Chuilinn* is likely to be nothing more than a Lewis variant of *Latha Coinnle* or *Latha na Coinnle*, Candle Day.

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