

## When it was no sin to plunder

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN an article headed ‘The Causes of Famine’ a few weeks ago, I said that I hoped in due course to say something about famine stories, famine years, and years with names like *Bliadhna an Earraich Dhuibh* (the Year of the Black Spring) and *Bliadhna a’ Bharr Ghoirid* (the Year of the Short Crop). I also promised to try to tell the step-by-step history of famine in the Highlands and Islands.

Over the next article or two I will try to fulfil these two undertakings in a systematic way by presenting such events in chronological order. I will deal with named years as they come, and fill out the account by mentioning other happenings of the kind which would have given their names to years — the kind answering to Sir Walter Scott’s handy definition that ‘the eras by which the vulgar compute time have always reference to some period of fear and tribulation, and they date by a tempest, an earthquake, or burst of civil commotion.’

I will start with a very localised one, a year whose name was given to me by the late Andrew Cumming of Strathnairn as *Bliadhna na Loisgt’*, ‘the Year of the Burning’. He understood that it was in in Mary Queen of Scots’ time, which puts it around 1560. Certainly the form of the noun, *loisgte*, is archaic, though I suspect that the correct form of the phrase is *Bliadhn’ an Loisgt’*. In later times the noun would take the form *Losgaidh*, and in fact we will come to *Bliadhna an Losgaidh* when we reach the year 1814.

According to Mr Cumming, in what he called *Bliadhna na Loisgt’* the Caledonian pines west of his home at Croft Croy were burned on Queen Mary’s orders ‘to get rid of *meirlich*’ (thieves), probably during her fights with Huntly, the ‘Cock of the North’, who was feudal superior of the Clan Chattan lands there.

From there we come into the seventeenth century, and disaster begins straight away. James Fraser, the minister of Kirkhill near Inverness, recorded that in the summer of 1601 the plague burst out. No-one knew, he said, how it had arisen or where it had come from. “Some suspected it to have had its rise upon the Buchan coast out of a Dutch cask with onions and hops cast ashore; but, not to dispute, the pestilence spread from Forth to the North, and raged here the length of Glenelg. None died there nor in our far Highlands and north isles; most of our people run to the hills, the purer air. I have spoken with several who remembered the manner of their death, and some upon which it broke and escaped, and the several pits in which many were buried, as yet covered over with stones.”

The following year, 1602, was remembered as *Bliadhna a’ Chàtha*, ‘the Year of the Chaff’. It was a famine year all over the Highlands. A mildew blasted the barley, the oats and pease never filled to any perfection, the straw blanched, and such corn as there was yielded no meal except, in Fraser’s words, ‘lick-dusted trash, without any aliment or food for man or beast’. It was also known as the ‘Seed Year’ because the corn gave seed but no meal.

The result was widespread mortality and an increase in plundering, of which the MacGregors’ descent on the prosperous Colquhouns at Glen Fruin in Dunbartonshire in February 1603 was the most glaring example. They left 140 dead and lifted 800 sheep and goats, 600 head of cattle, and 200 horses. King James’s response was a comprehensive set of measures ranging from the proscription of the MacGregors in the south to the colonisation of Lewis by the Fife Adventurers in the north. We can probably assume that, in that southern corner of the Highlands at least, 1603 was remembered as *Bliadhna Ghlinn Freòin*.

The cycle of tragedy had turned full circle again by 1621. In that year a very dry summer was followed by torrential rains and flooding which spoiled the harvest. Calderwood, in his ‘History of the Kirk of Scotland’, records that there had never been “greater fear of famine nor scarcity of seeds to sow the ground”, and he goes on: “Every man was careful to ease himself of such persons as he might spare, and to live as retiredly as possibly he might. Pitiful was the lamentation not only of vaging beggars, but also of honest persons.”

Everything now depended on the harvest of 1622. So far there had been little loss of life. But as luck would have it, bad weather destroyed this harvest as well. The ‘Chronicle of Perth’ recorded that “about the harvest and after, there was such a universal sickness in all the country as the like has not been heard of. There was also great mortality amongst the poor.”

The result was that 1623 saw probably the worst famine that this country has ever known. Some Lowland burghs experienced twenty times more burials than normal. The poor wandered in desperation from parish to parish, finishing in towns which were themselves losing between 15 and 20 per cent of their own inhabitants. Two-fifths of the burials were of children.

In a famine like this the Highland people tended to fall back on milk products. Lacking grain in their diet, however, they tended to fall prey to bowel diseases. Fish and game became more vital than ever, but at this time of year the poor were reduced to combing the shore for shellfish or the fields for edible weeds such as *brisgein* (silverweed) or nettles, and tapping the veins of farm animals for blood. The result was that in 1623 there were prosecutions in the baron court of Glenorchy for bleeding the laird’s cattle. In the last extremity, people began to feed their children on the seed corn which was carefully kept to provide the following year’s food — which explains why, despite the autumn of 1623 being fine and dry, 1624 became a famine year as well.

Another twenty years, and tragedy of a different kind strikes the people of Argyll. 1644 was remembered there for two centuries and more as *Bliadhna nan Athallach*, ‘the Year of the Athollmen’. In England Civil War was raging, and in Scotland Montrose raised a Highland army to attack the Covenanting forces of the Scots Parliament, and thereby relieve pressure on the beleaguered King Charles.

The backbone of Montrose's army was provided by the Highland and Irish troops led by his MacDonald general, Alastair mac Colla. After recruiting in Atholl, they decided to carry out a winter raid on the Campbell stronghold. For over six weeks from 13 December 1644, MacDonald's men plundered and burned their way through the Campbell territories from Breadalbane in the east, through Inveraray and Lorne to Lochaber in the north, and finally inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Marquis of Argyll's hastily-gathered army at Inverlochy, 2 February 1645.

In 'Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition', published in 1889, the Marquis's descendant, Lord Archibald Campbell, summed up the traditions of that most awful of all years for his family. "When the Athol people 'made a stable of Inverary', as Islay used to say, what is the first episode we know of? Sixteen gentlemen are hanged as a beginning, and the famous list of 'Depredations' committed is a continuation. Not a cow or a horse remains, nor a shawl or a petticoat is left, clocks, all disappear into Athol; arms, plaids — 'Hieland' plaids and 'Lowland' — all are taken."

He goes on: "It would be difficult to wax romantic over the desolation, or the absurd load of goods the Athol men took on their backs; or the feasts they made on the heather on the captured cattle. Scott would have given us a brilliant volume, and he would doubtless have made the Athol man die another death than that recorded — namely, entering a house near Inverary during the raid, and drinking so much milk that, falling on the threshold coming out, he burst!"

I will pass over 1650-1 and 1673-6, which were times of famine in Scotland as a whole. I will also pass over 1668, which was given to me by Andrew Cumming as *Bliadhna Cath na Càise* ('the Year of the Battle of the Cheese'), for the simple reason that I told the story of the Battle of the Cheese on this page in August 1994. I will come straight to the end of the century, when everything got steadily worse.

First of all there were two more years, 1685 and 1689 (or thereabouts), which some of the *Bliadhna nan Athallach* stories seem to refer to. Both of these were years in which Campbell fortunes were low, and the Athollmen (Stewarts and Robertsons, mainly) once again seized the opportunity to descend upon their foes.

1688 was a famine year. Almost a century later, it was recalled from the traditional memory of the older people by the minister of Kilmuir in Skye. "The seasons were so eminently unfavourable and the corn so deficient in quantity and quality," he wrote, "that the poor actually perished in the highways from want of aliment."

But it was in the 1690s — the period following Killiecrankie, the Boyne, and the Massacre of Glencoe — that the country was struck such a blow by famine that it can fairly be said that we have never recovered from it. This time it began in the north, in 1693, and as it went on for seven long years, it could rightly be likened by the Jacobites of the time to the Seven Lean Years that struck Egypt in the Book of Genesis. Drawing an analogy with Pharaoh, they blamed it on King William and his presbyterian revolution, and the name stuck — 'King William's Ill Years' is what they became, and *Bliadhna Goirt Rìgh Uilleim*, 'the Year of King William's Famine', was given to me by Andrew Cumming.

This then was the time in which Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun calculated that one person out of every three in Scotland was a beggar. But I will end with a story told by the late Isobel Grant in her book 'Along a Highland Road'. When she was a child in Strathnairn a little white house was pointed out to her. In a previous house on that site lived a farmer who had managed to save a little corn in one of the famine years. Desperate for food for their families, two of his neighbours stayed up late one night planning to take his corn by force. A third hungry man was there too, however, and said that it was shameful to rob a neighbour no matter how great their need.

They argued all night, and in the grey before the dawn they gave up their plan. But the implication of the third man's advice is clear. In time of famine it was reckoned no sin to plunder those who were not your kin or your neighbours. Just as the MacGregors had done to the Colquhouns.

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