

## Down to the Year of the Black Spring

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant, who visited the Highlands in 1769 and again in 1772, remarked that years of famine were as ten to one. What subsistence farming meant in practice was that in any ten years (such as the decade 1769-78, as recorded in the account book of William Mackintosh, tacksman of Dunachton in Badenoch), there might be one 'golden season' whose surplus could be used to subsidise the purchase of grain in some of the nine years of dearth. No wonder Pennant remarked that the inhabitants of Rum 'carried famine in their aspect'.

For all that, however, the progress of famine appears to be cyclical. I showed last time how the country was devastated by it in the 1690s. There followed a half-century in which the Highland people picked themselves off their knees, aided no doubt by the fact that the massive mortality of 'King William's Ill Years' had resulted in more land for the survivors and fewer mouths to feed.

Historians have found that between 1700 and 1750 grain prices in Scotland rose only slightly and slowly, with only one year (1740) in which dearth came close to famine. Dearth could be bad enough, but was seasonal by nature, and tended to attack at this time of year, the spring, when the weather was improving and the seed was in the ground but there would be no meal left in the kist.

On 28 April 1741, for example, it was recorded in the minutes of the Presbytery of Mull that when the school at Corryvullin in Ardnamurchan was formally visited, the schoolmaster (Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair, the poet) had sent an apology for his absence to the effect 'that through the great scarcity of the year he was under immediate necessity to go from home to provide meal for his family'. And on 14 May 1745, before that year's Rebellion had even begun, the magistrates and council of Inveraray found to their horror that the town was facing starvation. They collected £88 sterling, gave it to one of the merchants, and instructed him 'forthwith to repair to Glasgow and purchase any quantity of meal that was to be had, and failing meal of any kind, flour or biscuit, to be transported to this place in such a manner as he should judge best without loss of time'.

Confirming the generally rosy picture of that half-century, however, my record of named years for it is blank, with the exception of 1745-6, which had nothing to do with famine. These two years had various names: *Bliadhna Thearlaich*, the Year of Charles; *Bliadhna a' Phrionnsa*, the Year of the Prince; *Bliadhna an Fheachd*, the Year of the Hosting; *Bliadhna Chuil Lodair*, the Year of Culloden.

I suppose that, depending on local or personal usage, the first three of these might refer to 1745, to 1746, or, like the English term "the '45", to the period between Prince Charles Edward Stuart's landing at Eriskay on 23 July 1745 and his departure from Loch nan Uamh on 20 September 1746. *Bliadhna Chuil Lodair* refers to the battle fought on 16 April 1746.

My point about local usage is that many areas were only touched by Prince Charles on one or other of the two years — Eriskay in 1745, for example, or Culloden in 1746. 'The Year of the Prince' certainly meant 1746 in Strath Nairn, for this was the area that got the first anger of the Redcoats after the battle, and innumerable stories of their brutality survived there. Andrew Cumming told me that a woman was sabred and a child flung in a bog behind his house at Croft Croy. When he was a boy a very old cousin of his grandmother's told him how she remembered the womenfolk crying and taking to the birch trees on a hill in front of the house called *Creag nan Gobhar*, the Goats' Rock, on the day of Culloden.

There were some bad years following Culloden, not because of bad weather but because the land had been neglected due to the disturbed state of the country. For example, 1747 or thereabouts was remembered in Tiree as *Bliadhna nam Brisgeinean*, 'the Year of the Silverweed'. In spring the furrows were white with carrot-like silverweed plants, and the people made meal out of them — as indeed they did on many another spring before and after, but not to the same extent, and not always even through necessity.

Professor Smout tells us in his 'History of the Scottish People' that from 1750 to 1816 the price of grain rose fast. "Crop failures again became common," he says, and he mentions the years 1756, 1762, 1771, 1782, 1795, 1799, 1800, 1812 and 1816. Sure enough, Gaelic tradition records a run of named years; what is in doubt, however, is whether they started before 1771. In his story 'Young Pennymore' the Inveraray novelist Neil Munro referred to 1752 as the Year of the Stunted Corn, and in 'Boboon's Children' he mentioned the Year of the Stunted Oats. These terms look very similar to some of those applied to 1826, however, as I will show next time. We can conclude that either Munro had got it wrong, or the middle part of the century was continuing to be a bad time in Argyll.

With hindsight, we can see the disaster of 1771 approaching as if in a Greek tragedy. Look again at the diary of Mackintosh of Dunachton, for example, as reported in Isobel Grant's book 'Everyday Life on an old Highland Farm'. In 1769 the season was so rainy that Mackintosh's corn stood in the fields till the end of November. In 1770 there was snow on the ground till the middle of April. The 16th of that month, when he should have been getting on with the sowing, was 'the coarsest day ever seen', and the cold lasted into May.

In 1771, with famine already appearing, rain, snow and frost delayed the harvest, and the frost and snow that winter were 'very intense', continuing from 23 December 1771 to 4 April 1772, so that hunger stalked the land through that year and into 1773. But it was the spring of '71 that stuck in the mind, and it was a year that got an evil-sounding name: *Bliadhna an Earraich Dhuibh*, the Year of the Black Spring. Skye was badly hit. According to General Macleod of Macleod, his tenants lost a third of their stock.

Dr Johnson, who visited the island two years later, wrote: "In the year Seventy-one they had a severe season, remembered by the name of the Black Spring, from which the island has not yet recovered. The snow

lay long upon the ground, a calamity hardly known before. Part of their cattle died for want, part were unseasonably sold to buy sustenance for the owners; and, what I have not read or heard of before, the kine that survived were so emaciated and dispirited, that they did not require the male at the usual time. Many of the roebucks perished.”

There was so much destitution on the Macleod estates that — for the first time on record, as far as I know — the Government was prevailed upon to send a cargo of meal to the island. And similar relief was provided for many other parts of the West Highlands.

By 1880, when Alexander Nicolson placed it on record, a saying about 1771 had come into existence. *S fhada bhon dà latha sin, 's bho Bhliadhna an Earraich Dhuibh.* “It’s long since those two days, and since the Year of the Black Spring.” The ‘two days’, as every Gaelic speaker knows, signify changed times, and the saying as a whole seems to suggest that times had not only changed since 1771, but changed for the better. A variant recorded in the island of Arran went like this: *S mairg a chaill a chomh-aois Bliadhna 'n Earraich Ghràinde.* “Wretched is the person who lost his contemporary in the Year of the Ugly Spring.” There is a song, too, by the Kintail poet Iain mac Mhurchaidh, in which I see no reason to doubt that he is speaking of 1771; he emigrated to America shortly afterwards.

*B’e siud earrach dubh a’ challa:  
S lìonmhor fear dhan d’rinn e feannadh;  
Ged a chaill sinn an crodh bainne  
Se na gearrain bha mi caoidh.*

(‘This has been the black spring of destitution: / Many’s the man who has been stripped bare by it; / Though we have lost the milch cows / It’s the ponies I have been mourning.’)

Without the ponies he could not plough and harrow the land for sowing.

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