

## The Year of the White Peas

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

OF ALL the years that became seared into the consciousness of the Highland people, *Bliadhna na Peasaracha Baine*, the Year of the White Peas, was probably the worst. Only the calamities of the 1840s were to dim its memory to some extent.

It is a strange name, which I will explain in due course. I want to start the story at the beginning, which means the beginning of 1782, although the Year of the White Peas itself was really 1783. It is a story that tells us that no matter how diversified the food supply, with oats, barley, rye, potatoes, fish and milk products all by now on the menu, the one thing that we have never been able to beat in Scotland is the weather.

In Skye and other places the crops had failed in 1778 due to extremely averse weather conditions. But 1782 was a year like none other. A country laird from the fat wheat-growing lands of Lowland Perthshire, John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, left us a very full account of nature's unfolding cruelty, remarking that from start to finish of 1782 'there was something dreary and judgment-like in the weather'. As we follow his account, we can imagine — even when he does not tell us — what it must have been like for those born poor, for those born further north and west.

In January, he says, there were hurricanes of wind. The River Teith near his home flooded three times in the course of ten days. February and March saw a continuous frost, and in the middle of March it was aggravated by a prodigious fall of snow. In many parts of Highland Perthshire, at least, it lay two or three feet deep for a fortnight.

Even when the frost ceased at the end of March, snow and rain prevented the oats from being sown until the middle of April. Mid April to mid May saw piercing cold winds and remarkably little sign of vegetation of any kind.

The barley sowing went ahead in dry but very cold conditions. "By refusing to let more be sown till the weather grew milder," says Ochtertyre, "I succeeded better than most of my neighbours."

Mid May to mid June saw very heavy rains which chilled the young corn. There were ten days of hot weather about the middle of July, followed by torrents of rain and cold stormy winds for six solid weeks. It felt more like February than the summer. This culminated on 24 August with a hurricane which blew down a number of trees and damaged Ochtertyre's wheat by breaking the straw.

During the summer the price of grain stayed almost stationary, since a good deal of the 1781 crop was still to hand. September brought a fortnight of fine weather, but it was too little, too late. In Argyll, for a wonder, the oats were ripe, in Perthshire and elsewhere they were still green.

And now, in effect, the winter began. On 17 September Ochtertyre saw the Highland hills covered with snow. Then there were some frosty mornings, followed by boisterous wet weather to the end of the month. Panic set in. Foodstuffs that had cost 14 shillings at the start of September were selling for £1 by the end of it.

In Perthshire the oats began to ripen in the first week of October. On the mornings of 4 and 13 October Ochtertyre reported frost as hard as midwinter, the ground hard under foot till far into the day, and ice on the pools as thick as a crown piece. It whitened the late corn and prevented it ripening.

Everyone's eyes were now on the corn. Perthshire saw storms of wind, rain and hail for a week or so after 20 October, the night of the full hunter's moon. Ochtertyre could afford to wait no longer. When the rain stopped and the moon — now on the wane — appeared at midnight on the night of Thursday 24 October, he ordered out his men.

They worked day and night till they collapsed on the Sabbath, then began again under what was left of the moon on the morning of Monday 28 October. By midday his harvest was in. His wheat was excellent, his oats 'better than middling, and tolerably ripe', his barley very poor, his peas and beans mostly frost-bitten.

Two days later, on Wednesday 30 October, the great snow came. Around the countryside Hallowe'en saw stooks and sheaves white with snow and stiffened with frost. A melancholy sight, as Ochtertyre remarks, but there followed a severe ten-day frost with a piercing north wind which totally prevented the snow from melting; the curious result of these extraordinary conditions was that the remaining corn was in excellent condition for harvesting. There was, says Ochtertyre, hardly ever less spoilt corn in a late harvest.

After 10 November, then, in Ochtertyre's district at least, all eyes were on the potato crop, now very much at risk. The potatoes growing nearest the surface were lost, as were all that were rashly lifted before the end of that week.

Farther north and west there was no such window of opportunity. The corn was not cut there till well into November, and even more snow arrived to prevent the potatoes being lifted: deep snow, with a frost so intense, says Ochtertyre, that it threatened to bring the millstones to a halt, which would have made the people's distress even worse.

Mild weather finally arrived in mid December, though it didn't melt the snow on the upland fields. Many people were surprised to find some of their potato crop fit for food or for seed, but it wasn't enough. It was clear by now that Scotland could not feed herself. Moreover, Ochtertyre points out, "Being then at war with half the world, we had, in a great measure, lost the empire of the sea; and as the enemies' privateers swarmed on the coasts, the loss of a few ships might occasion a temporary famine."

By now people were dying.

The famine was so severe, it was later recalled, that a man might travel a day's journey and not find a boll of meal to buy. What meal was made of the corn of the district was as dark and nearly as sapless as the *dùdan*

or mill dust, that dust peculiar to oats which is separated during the shelling of the grain. A kind of bread was made of it, but it was impossible to cook it in any other form.

Even the more fertile districts were now suffering. Parliament was told that in Inverness there were many good farmers with their wives and children begging in the streets. "Last harvest has finished most of them. Meal or any kind of victuals cannot be had for love or money. Before the winter is over people will die in the streets."

A man who died at Drumbuidh near Dunlichity Church in Strathnairn about 1873 had been a boy of ten or twelve years old in 1783. He recalled being on the way from the mill at Dunlichity with his father when they saw a man coming from the east with a heavy burden wrapped in cloth. It turned out to be the body of a dead brother he was taking to the churchyard for burial. The two brothers had been travelling about the country together in search of food. One of them had succumbed to the famine at a place called Dailveallan, and the other, unable to find any one to help him — the people having died or left the district — had to carry the body himself, a distance of about three miles, to the churchyard.

In the south of England, by contrast, the harvest had been good, and Lowland lairds and merchants were able to buy in enough grain to feed themselves and their dependants. By the end of January this source was declining; fortunately hostilities ceased at this point, and what ultimately saved the Highlands as a result were the white peas that gave 1783 its name: peas from Holland, peas originally purchased to feed the Navy, peas which the Government now diverted to Scotland instead.

In district upon district, from Strathnairn in the east to Skye in the west, the people remembered the *peasair bhàn* for many years as practically the only food they could get. The pease meal was eaten as brose or as porridge. The Strathnairn people walked all the way to Elgin for it. To Glen Urquhart Sir James Grant sent '10 ton of choice picked potatoes for seed, 100 bolls of white pease for meal, and 50 bolls Blanesly seed oats'; some people there died of want, as we have seen; others survived by bleeding cattle or on nettles and wild herbs. In the north-west people got through the spring of 1783 on shellfish from the shore.

A Badenoch factor reported that he had given a man £80 to buy meal to keep his tenants alive till the next potato crop. The man went through Strath Spey, Strathavon, Glenlivet, Inveravon, Knockando and over to Elgin, but failed to get any meal.

In Inverness the pease meal was kept in the Meal Market Buildings, known as the Guard House, *An Taigh Geaird*. No-one was allowed inside except those in charge. Each buyer handed up his money into a high window, and the meal was let down in limited quantities over the wall, or from an upper-storey door, for fear of a mob.

Landlords like Grant were so shaken by this famine that it led to the founding in February 1784 of a 'Highland Society of Edinburgh' dedicated to the economic improvement of the Highlands and the preservation of Gaelic culture; it evolved into the organisation now known as the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland. In retrospect, it is curious to discover that one of Grant's greatest fears was that the people would want to emigrate *en masse*.

Even down to *Bliadhna na Peasaracha Bàine* it was still believed by landlords, apparently, that the Highlands' greatest riches were their people, and that all that was needed was to reorganise them.

If we think of how Ochtertyre brought in his corn so successfully on those moonlit nights of October, we can see what was in their minds.

**WHFP 11.4.97**