

### Three decades of disaster

#### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

HAVING examined the dreadful ‘Year of the White Peas’ (1783) last time, I would like to continue my calendar of disaster from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century.

The next bad year of note is 1790, when the spring and summer months were so wet in most parts of Skye and the Western Isles that it was impossible to cut or dry peats. Fuel was so scarce that year that people had to burn the heather roots that they had gathered for rope-making. As D A Maclean pointed out in his little book ‘Weather in North Skye’, it proved the truth of the proverb, *S'fhearr deathach an fhraoich na gaath an reothaidh*: ‘Heather smoke is better than a frosty wind.’ In other words, in such an emergency warmth and cooked food for your children must take precedence over ropes.

Back on the mainland, two very important phenomena in Highland history were coming together around this time. In his classic work ‘The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire’, the Rev. Dr Kennedy speaks of a communion at Kiltearn in 1782 as ‘perhaps as blessed a congregation as ever met in Scotland’, and says: “At the climax of its spiritual prosperity the cruel work of eviction began to lay waste the hillsides and plains of the north. Swayed by the example of the godly among them, and away from the influences by which less sequestered localities were corrupted, the body of the people in the Highlands became distinguished as the most peaceable and virtuous peasantry in Britain. It was just then that they began to be driven off by ungodly oppressors, to clear their native soil for strangers, red deer, and sheep. With few exceptions, the owners of the soil began to act as if they were also owners of the people.”

The result, in 1792 (when the French Revolution was at its height), was *Bliadhna nan Caorach*: ‘the Year of the Sheep’. John Prebble devotes a chapter to it in ‘The Highland Clearances’. The people of Ross-shire and Sutherland were being systematically deprived of the hill grazings which were necessary for survival. So they drove all the new sheep they could find as far as the River Conon or the Cromarty Firth and let them sink or swim. They had to be stopped by military force, and many of them were jailed. But as a show of resistance it was a failure, and by the time the nineteenth century arrived there was a clear choice for the people between famine and emigration.

One of the last of the many famines in Strathnairn came about now, and like so many others in that ill-favoured valley it was caused by mildew. It was said that there was no meal to be had in the whole parish of Daviot and Dunlichity except in two places, Faillie and Beachan, both of which had a dry and sunny exposure, and so the year was called *Bliadhna Faillidh Ghrianaich*, ‘the Year of Sunny Faillie’. The place is now called Faillie Mains. “If there is any sun at all Faillie has it,” Andrew Cumming told me.

Faillie fed the Strath that year until food was got elsewhere, and *Faillidh ghrianaich*, *gàradh Srath Nàrainn* (‘Sunny Faillie, the garden of Strath Nairn’) became proverbial.

It was in this famine, apparently, that two men from Brinmore and Tork in the Strath went to Inverness to buy meal, but could only get a pound each, so on they went to the villages of Petty and Croy, where they ended up begging from door to door.

By the end of the day they had a peck of meal between them, which they divided at the foot of the Tork hill and Brin. As they stood there one of them said, *Stad, stad, a choimhearsnaich, cha chreid mi nach eil mi chluinntinn na cloinne rànaich air son arain*. “Stop, stop, neighbour, I think I can hear the children crying for bread.” Their families were so hungry that most of the meal was eaten in handfuls without taking time to cook it.

We do not know for sure what year *Bliadhna Faillidh Ghrianaich* was. We’re told it was between 1800 and 1810. Perhaps it was 1807, which is on record in Skye and other places as a wet year with frequent storms that flattened the crops.

The next named year in my list is 1813, which was called in Islay *Bliadhna nan Soithichean Loisgte*, ‘the Year of the Burnt Ships’. Gilbert Clark, Port Charlotte, told Ian Fraser of the School of Scottish Studies about it in 1970, and his words were printed in ‘Tocher’ no. 6. The name refers to an incident in the ‘War of 1812’ which was fought between Britain and the US from 1812 to 1815. Apparently a warship called *The Full-Blooded Yankee* appeared in Loch Indaal and anchored at Aird Nis in Nereabolls. The miller and his apprentice went out to her, and the Americans wouldn’t let them go. They hauled the miller’s boat aboard and forced the two men to pilot *The Full-Blooded Yankee* up to the anchorage at Bowmore, where they set the shipping on fire.

The miller and his lad heard the Americans planning to plunder and burn the *Taigh Bàn* (Islay House), but instead of that they sailed back out, and when they were passing Nereabolls the pair were allowed to go. While the miller’s boat was still at the side of the vessel, to his surprise one of the sailors said to him in Gaelic, *As a seo suas, cumaidh thusa tuillidh uisge air do mhuilinn, a mhuilleir!* “From now on, keep more water to your mill, miller!” By which perhaps was meant that there was no knowing when *The Full-Blooded Yankee* might return to put Nereabolls to the torch.

The next year appears to have been known in the north as *Bliadhna an Losgaidh*, ‘the Year of the Burning’ — that at any rate is the name as Andrew Cumming gave it to me. It recalls how in June 1814 Patrick Sellar reintroduced to Strathnaver the burning of homes as a means of eviction, a practice that the people had been led to understand belonged solely to their own warlike past. Again it is well described in a chapter called ‘The Year of the Burnings’ in Prebble’s ‘The Highland Clearances’, while a little-known song by Duncan Macpherson from Rahoy in Morvern, who died in New Zealand in 1931, has this to say:

*S daor a dhòirt sibh fuil ur crìdh  
'S gach rioghachd teth is fuar:  
An latha chuir sibh Waterloo,  
Na glinn 'nan smùid mu thuath;  
Ur còir-bhreith chuireadh fo na féidh  
Nuair thoill ur n-euchdan duais;  
A' gabhail brath le sannt neo-cheart  
Air nàdar math an t-sluaigh.*

(You dearly spilled the blood of your hearts / In each country hot and cold: / The day that you fought Waterloo, / The northern glens ablaze; / Your birth-right given to the deer / When your deeds deserved reward, / Taking advantage with unjust greed / Of the good nature of the people.)

*B' uabhasach an gnìomh dhaoin'-uaisl',  
An sgiùrsadh cruaidh bha ann —  
Cha b' fhiach am beatha dhona trian  
Den dìol bh' ac' oirnn 's gach àm;  
Faic a' bhantrach bhochd leth-rùisgt'  
'S an taigh 'na smùid mu ceann,  
Sellar 's a chompanaich ghrànd  
A' gàireachdaich mu call.*

(‘Dreadful was the gentry’s deed, / That vicious scourging that took place — / Their wretched lives not worth a third / Of the price they’ve always charged us; / See the poor widow semi-naked / With her house ablaze around her, / While Sellar and his ugly friends / Laugh about her loss.’)

It is interesting to compare Sellar’s burnings in Strathnaver with the Yankees’ burning of the ships in Islay the previous year. The War of 1812 had arisen from the Americans’ need to defend the rights of neutral shipping from the depredations of British and French imperialists. Both the Yankees and Sellar identified ‘economic targets’, but there the similarity stops. The Yankees were brave men who attacked the rich, while Sellar was a coward who attacked the poor.

The next famine was after Waterloo, in 1817. As they had done in 1807, landowners in Skye and elsewhere were able to persuade the Government to help some of the needy with oatseed. But by now emigration was in full flood. And by the end of yet another famine in poor old Strathnairn around the 1820s, so many people had left that it was called (according to Andrew Cumming) *Bliadhna nan Tioradh Beaga*, ‘the Year of the Small Grindings’. The story goes that from the first corn to ripen after the famine, the thirty-three remaining families got a *tioradh* done in the mill of Bail’ an Tuim near Dunlichity church on the one Saturday evening, each man taking home a small bag for his family under his arm. The night had passed into the Sabbath before the last *tioradh* was finished, but then, it was a work of necessity and mercy.

Next time: the Year of the Great Heat, the Year of the Short Barley, the Year of the Wild Martinmas, the Year of the Parting, and the Year of the Awakening.

**WHFP 25.4.97**