

## The road to apocalypse

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE year 1826 had a variety of names. On Loch Ness-side it was called *Bliadhna an Teas Mhóir*, ‘the Year of the Great Heat’. In Badenoch it appears to have been *Bliadhna an t-Samhraidh Theth*, ‘the Year of the Hot Summer’. Andrew Cumming from Strathnairn gave it to me as *Bliadhna na h-Eòrna Geàrr*, ‘the Year of the Short Barley’, which in better Gaelic would be *Bliadhna an Eòrna Gheàrr*. Elsewhere it was *Bliadhna a’ Bhàrr Ghoirid*, ‘the Year of the Short Crop’. And even before the year was out there was a third phase, called *Bliadhna na Féill Màrtainn Fhiadhaich* ‘the Year of the Wild Martinmas’, which leads us into 1827.

If we exclude the different names for the year of the potato blight (which all mean basically the same thing), this is the largest number of different names ever given in Gaelic to any one year. Clearly it was a time of trauma for the people. Let’s look at what happened.

First of all, no rain fell from May until August. Rivers, lochs and springs ran dry. As a result of this, the corn crop was so short in many places that it could not be cut, and had to be pulled out by the roots. The pattern over the Highlands was not consistent, however. On the Lower Carse near Ardersier, for example, in spite of its sandy nature, the corn grew tall and strong, and since many districts round about were facing dearth, its yield was naturally in great demand.

Suddenly, on 22–24 November, at the height of the crisis over the harvest, nature took another ghastly twist. First however I should explain that Martinmas, the feast of St Martin of Tours, is 11 November, but that in 1826 the Highland people were still attached to the old Julian calendar, and that for them Martinmas did not therefore come along until 23 November.

I have no account of the storm in the Isles. But it hit Gairloch before Martinmas, bringing wind in terrible gusts and snow in huge flakes, which smothered all the goats owned by the tenants of MacKenzie of Gairloch at *Meallan nan Gobhar* (the Hillock of the Goats). Salted goat and smoked goat hams graced the laird’s table until the following May.

The storm seems to have increased in ferocity as it travelled eastwards across the Highlands. Around Inverness it did a great deal of damage. What was worse, there was a major Martinmas fair at Inverness, and according to the ‘Courier’ no less than eleven people perished as they tried to get back home to their own districts. Among them were a mother and son from Stratherrick. The storm hit the Strath on Martinmas day, and they took shelter at a dip of the road by a well before the ascent to Balnafoich. The ground in Stratherrick lay under snow until March 1827, and when their corpses were found, the boy still had a piece of sugar candy from the fair in his mouth. In 1922 a stone was erected at the spot in their memory.

The late Kenneth A. MacRae, speaking of Stratherrick in his ‘Highland Ways and Byways’, notes that ‘for many years this storm was remembered, and afterwards all events as births, marriages and deaths, were referred to by the people as having taken place before or after the year of the storm. It is recorded that two neighbouring sheep farmers lost 1,300 and 1,100 sheep respectively that night of havoc.’

In view of the long time the snow lay on the ground, Andrew Cumming thought that 1827 was *Bliadhna an t-Sneachda Bhuidhe*. Whenever it was, ‘the Year of the Yellow Snow’ was certainly associated in the people’s minds with hardship. “A corpse lay in Daviot church,” Andrew told me, “for over two months before it could be carried through the fields on a horse to our churchyard at Dunlichity.”

Others have thought that ‘the Year of the Yellow Snow’ was 1829, a year well described by D. A. MacLean, Staffin, in his ‘Weather in North Skye’. He wrote: “This year must have seen the longest period of snow lying continuously in Island weather history. It was not altogether the depth of snow that made this severe storm which swept the west coast so memorable, but the long spell of bright, dry, cold weather which followed its onset. The ground remained covered with drifts from the one heavy fall for several weeks. There was no normal thaw, but the drifts gradually melted in the glare of the sun. Eventually its long exposure caused its colour to change to a yellowish tinge. Hence the name by which the year 1829 is still referred to — *Bliadhna an t-sneachda bhuidhe*.”

Long before, Alexander Carmichael had given a somewhat different account in ‘Carmina Gadelica’. He was tentative about the date, writing 1829 with a question-mark, and said: “The snow lay so deep and remained so long on the ground, that it became yellow. Some suggest that the snow was originally yellow, as snow is occasionally red. This extraordinary continuance of snow caused much want and suffering throughout the Isles.”

I know of no named years at all during the 1830s. One might have thought this was a good sign, but the truth is quite the opposite. By the 1830s a pattern of economic circumstances had set in which meant that irrespective of the weather, irrespective of the harvest, the condition of the people was going to be wretched. As Matthew MacIver has pointed out in discussing the plight of Lewis in that decade, destitution crept up on the crofter because the price of his products fell while many of his monetary obligations remained fixed. Simultaneously the rapid increase in population ‘thrust the whole economy on to the Malthusian margins’.

There is an apocalyptic feel to those years. In the autumn of 1833, beautiful displays of the *fir-chlis* were visible in many parts of north-west Scotland on every clear night for two whole months. On some occasions the colours were as bright and distinct as if they had been formed by a giant prism. In 1835, due to a cold, wet spring, the sowing was late, and by harvest-time the unripe corn was being continuously deluged by rain. Low prices that autumn left cattle unsold, and many of these perished in the following winter.

In 1836 the ground was tilled with great difficulty due to the cold and rain, and in any case many people had little or no seed left. Cattle feed was practically non-existent, and emaciated beasts were partially fed on

bleached straw. In Lewis alone almost 700 head of cattle died, besides several thousand sheep, and hardly any lambs survived at all. The parish of Barvas alone lost 300 cattle. Summer and autumn were wet and by early October keen frost and heavy snows were making things desperate.

The result, in the winter of 1836-7, was destitution. Not only was there a shortage of food, but the peats had not been secured because of the rain. On 1 March 1837 the 'Inverness Courier' reported: "In this extremity the poor people have lately, in some places, been driven to consume their turf huts and cottages for fire. They drew lots whose house is to be taken down for fuel and who was to maintain the family deprived." This happened in Skye, among other places; there, and in Raasay, too, many of the woods were cut down for use as firewood.

Such were the circumstances that stimulated the philanthropic appeals of the celebrated Rev. Dr Norman Macleod, *Caraid nan Gaidheal*. Lord Macdonald bought seed and gave £2,000 to alleviate distress. Committees of clergymen and tacksmen doled out the meal and seed to the destitute. About 150,000 people in the Highlands and Islands were caught up in the disaster, and altogether £250,000 was spent on their relief.

As today in Africa, then, emergency aid had averted mass starvation. And as today in Africa, it was quickly concluded that prevention was better than cure. Clearly there was a cycle in operation which had last come to a head in 1783, the Year of the White Peas. It was now 1837, and nothing at all had improved, it was felt, in over fifty years. What had changed, however, was the landlords' attitude to emigration. The clans were no more, Napoleon was defeated. So the people were now free to go.

Systematic emigration was therefore widely advocated as the salvation of the Highlands. The Gael having been broken in battle in 1746, his clothes removed in 1747, and his language under daily bombardment by 'education', it was now seen necessary, by means of inducements to emigrate, to break forever the ties of love that bound him to his *dùthchas*.

There was only one thing left, hope of a seat at the right hand of the throne of grace, and it is about this time that another kind of named year first comes into view. Few districts of the Highlands and Islands, I believe, were without their *Bliadhna an Dùsgaidh* or 'Year of the Revival'. Indeed, Galson in Lewis went further and experienced *Bliadhna an Aomaidh*, 'the Year of the Swooning'. And finally in 1843 came *Bliadhna a' Bhreisidh* or *Bliadhna an Dealachaidh*, 'the Year of the Disruption', when the evangelical party finally broke away from the Established Church. But that is best treated as another subject.

This has been my fifth article on named years and famines. They have been pretty depressing. Nor is the story quite finished — the Year of the Potato Blight is still to come. But it can wait a while, as in my next piece I intend to take a little trip to Australia instead.

**WHFP 9.5.97**