

## Friday the thirteenth

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I THINK this article had better be dedicated to the indefatigable Coinneach MacIamhair of Radio nan Eilean. He was on the phone a few weeks ago. “Tomorrow is Friday the thirteenth. Why is Friday the thirteenth unlucky? Will you come on my programme and help us talk about superstitions?”

“Something to do with Judas Iscariot, isn’t it? OK,” I said.

There were to be three of us in the discussion along with Coinneach. A fisherman telling how you stick a knife in the mast to raise a wind, and things like that. A lady from Perth. And me. All going on air live at 8.35 in the morning.

My only worry was that the same thing would happen that happened the last time I was live on the radio at that time in the morning. I had opened my office windows because it was hot, and the City of Edinburgh Cleansing Department chose that moment to come by with their rubbish lorry over the cobblestones. The whole of the Western Isles heard it, though they didn’t seem to know what it was. “Is that a Hoover going?” says Coinneach on air, and me in mid-sentence. But Coinneach didn’t mind a bit. “It proves my programme goes out *live*,” he said afterwards.

What happened this time, on Friday 13 June, was that 8.30 saw me with my head bursting with fresh facts on Judas Iscariot, horseshoes, spilling the salt and why you shouldn’t walk under a ladder or open your umbrella inside the house, *but* still sitting in my regular bus on the way to work. Regular bus, not-so-regular time. For once it was late, maybe because it was miserable and wet and more people than usual were driving to work and causing traffic-jams. Or something.

I dashed into the office and rang Stornoway. It was nearly 8.45. “Sorry Ragnall they’re nearly finished. Just Coinneach and the lady from Perth. We didn’t get the fisherman either.”

“We should have known,” I said. “It’s Friday the thirteenth. You can’t beat it.”

So here, safely away from the fateful day to save me from misprints and other disasters, touch wood, are some of the things I might have said about Friday the thirteenth if I had got the chance.

Friday is an unlucky day because it was the day of the crucifixion. I won’t discuss Gaelic traditions about Friday because I did that on this page a few years ago. As for thirteen, it seems to be unlucky because that was the fateful number of persons at the Last Supper. The key text is John 6.70-1, “Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray him, being one of the twelve.”

The result is that it is traditionally considered extremely unlucky for thirteen persons to sit down to dinner, or indeed to gather together in any situation, especially as the crew of a boat. Thirteen was ‘the Devil’s dozen’, and one person or thing out of thirteen was considered to be the ‘Devil’s Bit’ or ‘Devil’s Lot’, so one of the thirteen people was sure to die before the year was out.

Opie and Tatem’s ‘Dictionary of Superstitions’ gives some very good examples of this. Perhaps the most basic is this one from Moor’s ‘Suffolk Words’ of 1823. “I have known, and now know, persons in genteel life, who did, and do, not sit down to table unmoved with twelve others. And so far is this feeling carried that one of the thirteen is requested to dine at a side table! The last sad supper . . . may have furnished materials for this superstition. Our notion is that one of thirteen so partaking, will die ere the expiry of the year. The manner of the death . . . is not necessarily Iscariotish.”

Superstitions take on a life of their own. In ‘The Spectator’ of 8 March 1711 we seem to see the beginnings of an idea that the curse is safely averted if one of the thirteen people is pregnant. “On a sudden an old woman unluckily observed there were thirteen of us in company. This remark struck a panic terror into several who were present, insomuch that one or two of the ladies were going to leave the room: but a friend of mine, taking notice that one of our female companions was big with child, affirmed there were fourteen in the room, and that, instead of portending one of the company should die, it plainly foretold one of them should be born.”

By 1796 the pregnancy idea seems to have become part of the doctrine. In a ‘Gentleman’s Magazine’ of that year is the following. “Dining lately with a friend, our conviviality was suddenly interrupted by the discovery of a maiden lady, who observed that our party consisted of thirteen. Her fears, however, were not without hope, till she found, after a very particular enquiry, that none of her married friends were likely to make any addition to the number. She was then fully assured that one of the party would die within the twelvemonth.”

If one out of a dinner-party of thirteen is going to die, which one is it? The first one to get out of his seat, it was said, presumably reflecting John 13.30, when Christ gives Judas a ‘sop’ or piece of food as a sign that he will betray him: “He, then, having received the sop, went immediately out; and it was night.” Many a party of superstitious people must have sat long into the night waiting for someone to take the risk of rising from his chair, or perhaps on occasion the host solved the problem by asking a servant to sit down and join them. There was, however, a third method: “Some say,” wrote the author of ‘Shropshire’ in 1883, “that the evil . . . may be averted if the whole company are careful to rise from their seats at the same moment.”

An alternative version of the same tradition identifies the fated person as the *last to sit down* rather than the *first to stand up*. This sounds to me like the practical application of superstition by the head of a large family who liked his brood to arrive in good time for meals. (The same applies to the other version, the targets perhaps being children who rushed off to play before the meal was over!) But once again an antidote is available. C Baron-Wilson’s book ‘Harriot, Duchess of St Albans’ includes the following: “The old story

runs, that the last individual of the thirteen who takes a seat has the greatest chance of being the ‘doomed one’; but Miss Mellon always gave the last comer an equal chance with the rest for life . . . she used to rise and say, ‘I will not have any friend of mine sit down as the thirteenth; you must all rise, and we will then sit down again together.’”

The final stage of evidence about superstitions is all about defying them. Here Opie and Tatem offer a quote from E Raymond’s ‘Jesting Army’ of 1930, “He was resolved that they should sit down thirteen at a table and defy the Luck of Gallipoli.” Military men, it seems, have always been particularly contemptuous of superstition. Field-Marshal Lord Roberts liked to point out that on New Year’s Day 1853 he was one of a party of thirteen who dined together at Peshawar on the Afghan frontier. Eleven years later, he said, all of them were still alive, despite having participated in the ghastly carnage of the Indian Mutiny.

It’s interesting to note how, judging from Opie and Tatem’s quotations, some superstitions are much more recent than others. This allows us to grasp how ideas have developed. First, as I have shown, we had Christ and his disciples adding up to thirteen. We have records of superstitions about thirteen people at table, or in a room, or on board ship, from 1711, and no doubt this idea is as old as the Bible itself. But the idea that the abstract number thirteen can be unlucky in its own right is quite recent. Opie and Tatem’s earliest quotation for that comes from the ‘Westminster Gazette’ of 1893. “‘Look at that,’ said Parnell, pointing to the number on his door. It was No. 13! ‘What a room to give me! They are Tories, I suppose, and have done it on purpose.’”

Again, the unluckiness of Friday is biblical and very old: Gaelic tradition is shot through with it, it’s in Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale (“And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce”), and international folklore ascribes to that day almost every disaster that has ever befallen the world, from the temptation of Eve, the murder of Abel, the Flood and the confusion of tongues in the Tower of Babel, to Herod’s Massacre of the Innocents, the stoning of Stephen, and William Tell’s problem with the apple. But the idea of Friday the Thirteenth being especially unlucky is new, in fact Opie and Tatem’s first example of it dates from 1913, a quote from ‘Notes and Queries’: “I have met a ‘coach’ [private tutor] of fine mental capacities . . . who dreaded the evil luck of Friday the 13th.”

Nearly every other Friday superstition is older. The bad luck of getting married on a Friday is on record from 1795. The bad luck of moving to a new job on a Friday is on record from about 1797. The bad luck of beginning a journey (or anything else) on a Friday is on record from 1804. The bad luck of being born on a Friday is on record from 1846. The bad luck of courting on a Friday is on record from 1851. The bad luck of hearing news on a Friday is on record from 1883. The bad luck of moving to a new home on a Friday is on record from 1900. The only Friday items in Opie and Tatem which are newer are the bad luck of getting up after an illness on a Friday and of putting butter churned on a Friday, or eggs laid on a Friday, into a child’s christening cake — both 1923. I should add that many of these items can be shown from Gaelic tradition to be much older than the dates given, but that Gaelic tradition is totally silent about Friday the thirteenth.

As for Gaelic tradition about the number thirteen, the only thing that occurs to me is the saying *An té nach gabh a roghainn á triùir gabhaidh i a roghainn á trì deug*. ‘The girl who won’t make her choice out of three men will make her choice out of thirteen.’ It sounds innocent enough, and statistically accurate — a recent computer study in the States, if I recall correctly, concluded that a random selection of thirteen men will include the ideal partner for any given woman, and vice versa! But the traditional story in which the proverb is quoted shows the thirteen in a sinister light. The beautiful daughter of Duncan MacGregor of Dunan in Rannoch is abducted on a cattle-raid by MacDonald of Keppoch. She proves too much of a handful. Surrounding her with a dozen of his men, he utters the saying. She consents to marry one of them, Cameron of Blàr a’ Chaorainn (whom she has put her eye on in any case), and her father comes to the wedding.