

“Your brains the next time!”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“COUGHS and sneezes spread diseases.” That may be so, but as far as superstition goes, coughs and sneezes part company from there on. Coughs are from man, but sneezes, it seems, are of a higher order altogether. Throughout the history of civilisation, and in practically every society under the sun, people seem to have felt the need for a little ritual protection after a sneeze. *Bless you!*

It’s older than Christianity, and it’s wider than Christianity. In AD 77, in his ‘Natural History’, Pliny asked precisely the same question that is forming in your mind as you read this. “Why is it that we salute a person when he sneezes — an observation,” he wrote, “which Tiberius Caesar, they say, the most unsociable of men, as we all know, used to exact, when riding in his chariot even?”

I’m tempted to remark that Pliny may have inadvertently provided an answer to his own question. Have you ever sneezed when driving, and realised with horror that for reasons beyond your control you have just driven at 70 mph for two or three seconds with your eyes firmly shut and a death-grip on the wheel? Tiberius would have felt exactly the same in his chariot. I imagine that a horse could be pretty confused by a loud ATCHOO and a sudden twitch on the reins. But surely that’s not the whole story.

What exactly would Pliny and Tiberius have said? Well, Apuleius in his ‘Golden Ass’, a work of the second century AD, has this (in Robert Graves’ translation). “‘Bless you, my dear!’ he said, and ‘bless you, bless you!’ at the second and third sneeze.”

The Victorian anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor summed it up for us. “In Asia and Europe the sneezing superstition extends through a wide range of race, age, and country. Among the passages relating to it in the classic ages of Greece and Rome, the following are some of the most characteristic: the lucky sneeze of Telemachus in the Odyssey; the soldier’s sneeze and the shout of adoration to the god which rose along the ranks, and which Xenophon appealed to as a favourite omen; Aristotle’s remark that people consider a sneeze as divine, but not a cough; the Greek epigram on the man with the long nose who did not say *Zeu Soson* when he sneezed, for the noise was too far off for him to hear; Petronius Arbiter’s mention of the custom of saying *Salve* to one who sneezed . . .”

The one about the long nose has been put into modern English.

*Dick cannot blow his nose whene’er he pleases,
His nose so long is, and his arm so short;
Nor ever cries God bless me! when he sneezes —
He cannot hear so distant a report.*

We can trace the custom through the Middle Ages, thanks to Opie and Tatem’s ‘Dictionary of Superstitions’. Writing in Latin, the Dutch scholar Erasmus, in his ‘Familiar Colloquies’ of 1526, lists the ‘forms of well-wishing to one that sneezes’. These are, he says: *May it be lucky and happy to you! God keep you! May it be for your health! God bless it to you!*

The early Reformers looked with suspicion on this sort of thing, and in 1618 an English writer called Harrington said, “If one had sneez’d, to say (as is the fashion) *Christ help*, ’twas witch-craft and deserv’d damnation.” It may have been on account of this Protestant attitude that people took to bowing respectfully to the sneezer instead, or doffing their hats, or both. Joseph Hall, bishop of Exeter, suggested in 1608 that anyone who failed to take off his hat when he sneezed could be no friend of his — “When hee neeseth, thinks them not his friends that vncouer not.”

On the other hand, the custom may have been got from the hyper-courteous French. Charles Platt, in ‘Popular Superstitions’ (1925) wrote: “In France, in earlier days, a sneeze was greeted by the removal of the hat; when the paroxysm was over, the sneezer formally returned the salutes of all present.”

At any rate, blessings were soon back in fashion among Anglicans, added to the rest. In 1688, for example, the English antiquary John Aubrey wrote, “We have a Custome, that when one sneezes, every one els putts off his hatt, and bowes, and cries *God bless ye Sir!*” But blessings remained pretty suspect among Presbyterians. In 1753 the ‘Scots Magazine’ talked of those who ‘bowed with a a graceful simper to a lady who sneezed’.

Was the ‘simper’ a blessing, or something else? I don’t know, but I do know that there are some pretty big differences in usage today between Catholic Ireland and Gaelic Scotland. My wife is an Irish speaker from Galway, and when someone sneezes she says: *Dia linn!* Her late father, a Munsterman from Co. Tipperary, used to say: *Dia linn ’s Muire agus cabhair Dé chughainn!* (‘God be with us and Mary and God help us!’) Where he got it I don’t know, because I once noted down from him the hundred or so Irish words and expressions that he grew up with in Hollyford, and this wasn’t among them.

Dia linn! has gone pretty deep. Our two girls grew up hearing mainly English from their mother and Scottish Gaelic from their father, but *Dia linn!* is still what they say to a sneeze. My own *Deiseil!* has made little impression. Again, where I got *Deiseil!* I’m not very sure; it’s just the word I know, and it has to be said it’s not Christian, for it means sunwise, clockwise, the lucky direction, and hence, if you like, ‘Lucky!’

The standard work on Scottish Gaelic superstitions is the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell’s ‘Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland’ of 1900. It can be a very irritating book, because most of his quotes are in translation only, and in the paragraph I am about to reproduce from p. 238, *all* of his quotes are in

translation only. He doesn't mention *Deiseil!* He begins: "When a person sneezes it is customary for the bystander to say 'Thank you,' to which is sometimes added, 'We will not take his name in vain.'"

'Thank you' — *Taing dhuibh* or *Gura math agaibh* or *Tapadh leibh*, I suppose — is pretty extraordinary in international terms, for it goes beyond reverence, as if the sneeze itself had conveyed a blessing. The other part will be: *Cha toir sinn 'ainm an diomhanas*. Clearly it represents a rather extreme Protestant reaction to what Campbell now goes on to tell us: "Some say, 'God be with you,' others, 'God and Mary be with you,' and others, 'St Columba be with you.'" These will be: *Dia leibh! Dia 's Moire leibh! Calum Cille leibh!* (*or leat!*)

Campbell continues: "By saying, 'The hand of your father and grandfather be over you,' the Fairies are kept away." As it happens, Campbell gave this in Gaelic earlier on in the book, at p. 98: *Làmh t' athar 's do sheanar ort*. The words were there uttered by an otherworld person, a fairy or demon, whose thieving intentions towards MacLean of Duart's corn-crop had just been thwarted by MacLean's evocation of God. *Làmh t' athar 's do sheanar ort*, says the demon to MacLean, *bha feum agad labhairt*. 'The hand of your father and grandfather be upon you, it's as well for you that you spoke!'

It is eerily reminiscent of Zulu belief. According to Tylor, when a Zulu sneezed he said something like, "I'm now blessed. The ancestral spirit (*Idhlozi*) is with me, it has come to me. Let me hurry and praise it, for it is what has made me sneeze." And he would praise the spirits of the dead of his family, asking for cattle, wives and blessings.

What then, to the Zulu, was the sneeze? Was it the good spirit itself, or was it the bad spirit being ejected? Or, in asking this question, am I imposing Christian values of good and evil on a belief-system that acknowledged a very different pair of opposites, the world and the otherworld?

That's how I read the Gaelic tradition, and the international one. The sneeze is neither good nor bad, it is merely a sign of spiritual activity, which therefore has to be Christianised, or otherwise claimed for one's side, whatever that may be.

Campbell's conclusion is entirely unexpected. He says: "Any words would seem to have been deemed availing, and some of the phrases used were not choice. If the bystander should say, 'Your brains the next time!' the person sneezing should answer, 'The bowl of your head intercept them!'"

What's this? *T' eanchainn an ath-turas? Ceapadh mias do chinn i?* Instead of being pious and polite, people are being rude to each other. Is it a rare example of a ribald sub-culture coming to the surface? Is it a Protestant counter-superstition, rather like going out of your way to walk under a ladder, as some folk will do? Is it modern times emerging, an understanding of germs, a vivid way of saying, 'Use a handkerchief!' or 'Put a sock in it'?

Campbell doesn't tell us, and that is all he has to say on the subject. But I have been quite surprised to find a mixed pattern in English usage too. *Bless you!* or *God bless you!* is not as universal as I had thought. Opie and Tatum record from 1892: "At the Asylum for Fatherless Children at Reedham [Norfolk] a custom prevails amongst the girls of solemnly rising and saying 'God bless you, miss!' whenever a mistress sneezes in their presence." In a book called 'The Origins of Popular Superstitions and Customs' first published in 1930, however, the author, one T Sharper Knowlson (sic!) remarks, "Probably there are people living today who can remember the 'God bless you' which was usually addressed to a person after a sneeze."

From the same period (1934) Opie and Tatem record someone saying, "In my youth one often heard a person say 'God bless you!' to a child when it sneezed, but I never heard it said to an adult." Yet from 1985 they have a London woman saying, "I always say 'Bless you' when I hear someone sneeze — even if they are at the other end of a bus." Are we perhaps dealing in Britain with a tradition which some forms of Protestantism were eradicating, and which Irish Catholicism has brought back again?

So, more questions than answers. But next time I will try to see if there is a modern answer to Pliny's ancient question. *Cur sternutamentis salutamus?*