

## The last of the named years

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

EARLIER this year I had a good deal to say on this page about famines and named years. The two subjects were intertwined, because the years that served as fixed points in the calendar turned out in almost every case to be named for memorable failures in the food supply.

This model for looking at the past seemed to offer an alternative view of Highland history, a view not of clans and dynastic struggles, battles and bloody massacres, but of the struggle of ordinary people to stay alive from day to day and year to year. How many Highland children (or adults) know that the Year of the White Peas, *Bliadhna na Peasaracha Bàine*, killed infinitely more people than Culloden and Butcher Cumberland? Or that in terms of human suffering the Massacre of Glencoe was a fleabite compared to King William's Ill Years, *Bliadhnachan Goirt Rìgh Uilleim*, that followed?

It is a method which produces few goodies or baddies, but a grey-and-black picture in which most years are bad but some are even worse — a picture in which the only real enemy is the environment, even though that same environment is also the only real friend. Of course this fashionable word 'environment' is mere hindsight. It would be more in tune with how people rationalised their plight if we spoke instead of 'God in His pleasure and His wrath'.

Anyway, I brought the subject down in chronological order to the Potato Famine of 1846, *a' Bhliadhna Ghais am Buntàta*, and then I left off to talk about superstitions and other things, because I needed time to find out a little more about the Uig flood of 1877. In fact I am still not quite sure whether the Year of the Uig Flood is a genuine named year or not, so I am going to leave it to the end as a sort of dramatic postscript.

Let me pick things up where I left off by referring first to *Bliadhna na Ruithe Duibhe*, the Year of the Black Diarrhoea. This name was given to several different years in Strath Nairn, the most famine-prone of all places. "One such bad year," Andrew Cumming told me, "was in the memory of an old man I knew who was over a hundred when he died in 1942."

If we can take this statement at its face value, the old man may have been referring to 1846 itself or some year shortly after it, so let us just say that it was about 1850. The *ruith dhubh* is referred to in general terms in James Fraser's paper 'Strathnairn in the Olden Times', read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1883. He says: "During the severest periods of dearth many of the poorer people had to live for part of the year almost entirely on dairy produce and on bleeding their cattle. What help they may have got at such times from the fishing of the rivers and lochs, or from wild animals, does not appear from the traditions as I have got them. In later times, however, it is well known that some houses had each a tub of salmon and trout salted every year."

Although Fraser does not admit it, I suspect that what kept a balanced diet out of the mouths of the people down to 1752 in Strath Nairn was the feudalised structure of society, the bullying and harassment of baron bailies with their petty courts and 'right of pit and gallows'. Anyway, he goes on to explain that the people were anxious to maintain their cattle stock, and were therefore willing to slaughter a beast only in extreme circumstances. "The cattle were bled according to some system supposed to have been better understood at the time. A full grown beast had a chopin of blood taken; and beasts so bled were believed to fatten more rapidly on the grass than others that had not been bled." A chopin or *seipein* was a liquid measure equivalent to two pints.

"The bleeding was, I believe," adds Fraser, "more common in Stratherrick, where the cattle were sometimes taken down from the summer grazings of Killin for the purpose, and then sent up again. The blood was boiled, mixed with oatmeal when it could be got, and poured out into dishes to form cakes, or puddings, which were afterwards cut with the knife as required. The long use of such innutritious dishes, without a proper admixture of bread, and of other nourishing varieties of food, often gave rise to disease, and especially to one that is known as *an ruith dhubh*; and in the spring months deaths were frequent."

But Fraser concludes with what I suspect is a highly insightful remark: "After the occurrence of a famine, it is wonderful how rapidly the people seem to have recovered their normal state of comparative comfort and cheerfulness."

Leaving aside 1877, the year of the Uig flood, my next named year is 1882, *a' Bhliadhna a Sgapadh an t-Arbhar* — 'the Year the Corn was Scattered'. In his book 'Lewis: A History of the Island', Donald Macdonald points out that in autumn 1882 in Lewis the fishing had been a complete failure. Much of the potato crop was diseased, and finally, on 1 October, a severe gale scattered the stooked corn. In some districts a half to three-quarters of the grain crop was lost. Many of the people were left destitute, 'especially the landless squatters'. As a result, the following winter was 'one of the worst ever experienced by the people of Lewis, and once again, poverty was rampant'.

The agonies of that year, and its name, are also referred to by the late Rev. Donald Gillies in his book 'An Eaglais Shaor ann an Leódhas', and clearly a great deal more could be said. But I will press on.

Donald Macdonald is quite specific that *a' Bhliadhna a Sgapadh an t-Arbhar* was used to date events. Perhaps it was the last (or almost the last) year to be used in this way. For one thing, the grip of universal English-based education after 1872 was such that from now on people would be more inclined to give a year a number than a name. *Bha e trì bhliadhna dh'aois ann an eighteen eighty two* is a much more likely-sounding remark than *Bha e trì bhliadhna dh'aois anns a' bhliadhna a sgapadh an t-arbhar*.

For another thing, though I could be wrong, it seems to me that the connection between the naming of years and the food supply is so strong that when hunger ceased to be a factor in people's lives, years ceased to be named. I have never heard 1919 referred to as *Bliadhna an Iolair* or *Bliadhna na h-Iolair*, for example. But I have heard 1943 referred to as *Bliadhna nan Cragan*, the Year of the Tins, and that has to do with the food supply.

What happened, in short, is that, early in the autumn of 1943, the SS *Iurlana* of Montevideo foundered on some rocks called the Flosannan just west of Idrigill Point on the north-west coast of Skye. The *Iurlana* brought

the people of Duirinish manna from heaven in the form of thousands upon thousands of tins of corned beef and dehydrated mutton. By the time the vessel finally went down, a week later, there was not a family in the parish that did not have its share of booty hidden in peatstacks, under floors, on joists and henroosts and in the thatch of the older houses. But as the whole story is beautifully told in Angus Macphee's book 'Cunnartan Cuain', published in 1981, there is no need for me to enlarge upon it here.

There are, of course, other named years, and I would be delighted if people would write in and tell me about them. Most of them will refer to genuine events. *Bliadhna nan Con*, the Year of the Dogs, is an expression for a time so far back that it is lost in the mists of history, but in origin it must surely refer to a particular famine in which the people ate their dogs. It would be good to know when that was, just as it would be good to have some hard evidence about *Bliadhna an t-Sneachda Bhuidhe*, the Year of the Yellow Snow — I have been pursuing that one for a long, long time, and have yet to run it to ground.

On the other hand *Bliadhna na Braoisge*, the Grinning Year, has not come yet and never will. It means the Greek Kalends. Nevermas. Never. But why on earth is it called *Bliadhna na Braoisge*? There must be a story behind that one. Another one that has been mentioned to me recently is *a' Bhliadhna Bhuidhe*, 'the Yellow — or Golden — Year'. What year it is I don't know, but it must surely refer to a bumper harvest.

Finally, then, I come back to the Uig flood of 13 October 1877, an event described by the late John A Macleod as 'the greatest calamity which ever happened in the Island of Skye'. I have collected a number of sources for it, but only D A Maclean's book 'Weather in North Skye' of 1977 refers to 'the Year of the Uig Flood'. In Gaelic that would be *Bliadhna Tuil Ùige*, and my friend Aonghas MacNeacail has not heard the expression. What he *has* heard is *an Tuil Mhór*. (I suppose it depends where you are from. D A Maclean was from Staffin, Aonghas Dubh is from Uig itself.) I'd be glad to hear from any reader who has heard *Bliadhna Tuil Ùige*, *Bliadhna na Tuile Móire* or the like; on the basis that the crops were destroyed, I think it is likely that such an expression exists.

'Weather in North Skye' sets the scene. 1877, says D A Maclean, was spoken of as far afield as Ireland as the worst farming year since the potato famine of 1846. It was generally the wettest and coldest year on record. As far north as Orkney it was also referred to as the stormiest year in memory. On the east coast, it was the wettest year since 1842, in Argyll the wettest since 1855.

Ironically, no records were broken in Skye — 1861, 1862 and 1863 had all been much wetter. June 1877 in Skye was a fine month with a good deal of hot weather. July produced consistent drizzle, and August was cold and wet. In September it was fine again and the harvest got under way. But on 10 October in Skye there were severe gales with snow, thunder and lightning. The 11th was just as stormy, and on the 12th there was serious flooding in Broadford.

D A Maclean then points to the layout of *Gleann Ùige*, the Conon Valley, at whose foot lies Uig. It is a comparatively small valley ringed by eight hills over 1,000 feet in height. At its head is the highest point of the northern half of the Trotternish Ridge, Ben Edra (2,003 feet), flanked by four passes: to the north, *Bealach nan Coisichean* (the Walkers' Pass) and *Bealach Ùige*; to the south, *Bealach a' Mhorghain* (the Pass of the Gravel) and *Bealach Amadail*. As the old song says,

*S fhada bhuam fhìn bonn Beinn Eadarra,  
S fhada gun teagamh uam Bealach a' Mhorghain,  
Cùl nam monaidhean, bràigh nam bealaichean,  
Bonn nam bearraichean 's Bealach a' Mhorghain.*

('Far from me is the base of Ben Edra, / Far indeed from me is the Pass of the Gravel, / The back of the moors, the brae of the passes, / The base of the ridges and the Pass of the Gravel.')

Flowing westwards from all four passes, the Conon River drops about 850 feet in the first mile of its course. At least eight streamlets, each three-quarters of a mile or more in length, converge fan-wise on the lower run of Coire Amadail to form the *Abhainn Dhubh*. For nearly two miles the *Abhainn Dhubh* flows in a remarkably straight course, falling quite slowly from 800 down to 250 feet. Just before it is joined by the other main branch, *Lòn an t-Sratha*, a short north-south escarpment crosses their line of flow; the ground thus slopes down 200 feet in as many yards, producing an attractive series of waterfalls. The newly-united Conon finally passes through a bottleneck gorge before reaching the sea close to another river-system, the south-flowing Rha.

Following a week of rain all these burns were full and the ground was soaked to saturation point. Maclean calculates that nearly six inches of rain fell on the northern half of the Trotternish Ridge during the 24 hours to 9 a.m. on 14 October 1877. "Gales, storms, and even winds of hurricane force were widely reported, as well as blizzards and thunderstorms, as if all the elements were acting in concert on a huge stage . . . the amount of water which collected in and flowed through the Conon Valley in the time specified could well have approached two million seven thousand tons."

In my next article I will show the result.

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