

## A double dose of blue moons

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

NOT for the first time, a kind invitation to take part in Coinneach Mór's programme on Radio nan Gaidheal has served to decongest my thought processes on a matter of consuming interest to the Quern-Dust Calendar. I am of course referring to Coinneach's desire to know why the moon should ever be called blue.

Experts were called in to debate the question, and so was I. It seems that it is being put around by the media that we are suffering a double dose of blue moons at the moment. In other words, that the phrase 'once in a blue moon' refers to those rare occasions when there are two full moons in one calendar month. This happened in January and is going to happen again in March.

How does it come about? Well, a moon lasts 29.5 days. There are mostly only 28 days in February. That means that if (like this year) there is a full moon on the last day of January, there will be no full moon in February at all, but instead we will get a full moon at the beginning of March and another one at the end of March. A double helping of 'blue moons' like this is not going to happen again until 2018.

That's all perfectly simple and scientific, but who says it's called a blue moon? Trivial Pursuit, apparently. (Remember it?) 'Sky and Telescope' magazine asked the Trivial Pursuit people where they got the idea from. They got it from a 1985 children's almanac, they said. So far so good. 'Sky and Telescope' asked the children's almanac's authors where they got the information. "Sorry, we can't remember," they said. Great stuff lads. Well done all round.

OK, so we're on our own. One explanation mentioned on the programme, and which I didn't fancy very much, was from the 'Maine Farmers' Almanac'. Apparently when there were two full moons in a month, the 'Maine Farmers' Almanac' printed the first one red, and the second one blue. Now I am not sure of the date of the 'Maine Farmers' Almanac', though I dare say we would all like it to be true because it is so neat, but as Maine farmers will no doubt appreciate, we have a potential chicken-and-egg problem here. Is not possible that the distinguished editor of the 'Maine Farmer's Almanac' coloured his second moon blue because he was so familiar with the popular expression 'once in a blue moon'?

Frankly, if the source of the expression was the 'Maine Farmer's Almanac', I would expect our standard works of reference to cite at least one American source for the moon being blue. And believe me, in hunting through the same standard reference works for the history of English words of Celtic origin, I have become very accustomed to American sources being cited. But not one American citation is given for 'blue moon' either by the 'Oxford English Dictionary' or its offshoot, G L Apperson's 'Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs'; *per contra*, it appears to be a thoroughly English notion. Here is what I have found.

In 1528, in a poem beginning "Rede me and be nott wrothe, / For I saye no thinge but trothe", the English poets William Roy and J Barlow declared: "Yf they saye the mone is beleave, / We must beleave that it is true."

Under 'blue moon' Apperson also cites Thomas Dekker's 'Knight's Conjuring' of 1607: "She would have trickes (once in a moone) to put the diuell out of his wits." This was mischievous of Apperson, because 'once in a moone' does not mean the same as 'once in a blue moon', but he may have been keen to place on record the phrase that provided the underlying structure for 'once in a blue moon'. After all, nowadays we don't say 'once in a moon' or 'once in a month' but simply 'once a month'. As for Dekker generally, he is a great source for the kind of vocabulary that was moving up from the underclasses into standard English, through his lively depictions of the thieves, whores, craftsmen and shopkeepers of London in his day.

Then there is a 200-year gap, and it is curious that when the expression finally arrives on record in 1821 it is in a book by Pierce Egan which was issued in monthly numbers under the title 'Life in London; or the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom'. Says one of the characters: "How's Harry and Ben? — Haven't seen you this blue moon." And Egan helpfully adds a footnote: "*Blue moon* — this is usually intended to imply a long time." Obviously Egan, whose work is regarded today as interesting for the light it throws on the manners of the period and the many slang phrases he introduces, didn't expect his readers to be familiar with the expression.

To judge from his name, Egan was an Irishman, but the dialect he was presenting was cockney, more or less. In the second half of the nineteenth century the expression 'blue moon' appears to have become acceptable, but still appears only in English writing. Edmund Hodgson Yates, for example, was well known to Dickens and Thackeray; in his 'Wrecked in Port' of 1869 he has a reference to: "That indefinite period known as a 'blue moon'."

When female writers use a phrase we know that it has become polite. 'Once in a blue moon' arrives with a bang in the work of the very prolific Mary Elizabeth Braddon, of whom George Bernard Shaw once wrote that she was 'what we now call a lowbrow; but . . . her style would overawe us now as classical'. She wrote 'Lady Audley's Secret' and 80 other novels. In 'J. Haggard's Daughter' (1876) she speaks of 'a fruit pasty once in a blue moon', while in 'Barbara' (1880) a character says: "I suppose you would have sent Ma a ten-pound note once in a blue moon."

It seems to me that that dismisses from the equation the 'Maine Farmers' Almanac' and anything American, literary, or hoity-toity. It's a plain man's expression from London, and it means a rare event, something seldom seen. On Coinneach's programme, Donald G MacLeod explained it simply and satisfactorily. Very occasionally the moon really does appear to turn blue, thanks to volcanic eruptions or freak weather conditions throwing dust into the atmosphere.

Actually, in connection with *Bliadhna an t-Sneachda Bhuidhe*, 'the Year of the Yellow Snow', I once gave an example of such phenomena on this very page. I quoted some words of the climatologist Hubert

Lamb from his book 'Climate, History and the Modern World' — "In Scotland . . . 1783 was not much better because of the haze of dust which obscured the sun for three weeks and the sulphurous fog from the great volcanic eruptions in Iceland in May and June of that year, though the summer was hot in England. Some of the ash-fall damaged the crops in Caithness, in the north of Scotland. The sulphurous atmosphere smelt noxious, made the eyes smart and damaged plants in Holland. In the south of France the sun was not visible in June of that year until it was 17° above the horizon because of the density of the upper haze."

The eruptions in Iceland were those of Laki Giga. It seems to me that if the summer was hot in London that year the moon would have been visible, and that if the moon was visible it may well have been turned blue by some of those sulphurous fogs. It also seems to me that the knowledge of such blue moons would have been brought home by the sailors and soldiers who served abroad in increasing numbers from the eighteenth century onwards, thus witnessing at first hand the weird and wonderful effects of such eruptions as those of Vesuvius in 1774, Tambora in 1815, Krakatoa in 1883 and Pelée in 1902.

So that is that. Volcanic dust turning the moon blue. Something else of use to the Quern-Dust Calendar came out of Coinneach's programme, however. The notes kindly provided from the internet by Radio nan Gaidheal, *beannaich iad*, listed by name all the moons of the year, like this: Moon After Yule, Wolf Moon, Lenten Moon, Egg Moon, Milk Moon, Flower Moon, Hay Moon, Grain Moon, Fruit Moon, Harvest Moon, Hunters' Moon and Moon Before Yule. "The trouble was that about once every three years," the notes burble on, "there would be a 13th moon — the Blue Moon — which would upset schedules for church services and celebrations."

Now that's interesting. Not for its reference to the Blue Moon, which I strongly suspect is spurious, given the complete absence of any reference to blue moons in this sense in the historical record of the term which I presented above. No, it's interesting because some at least of these twelve basic moon-names are authentic and a minority of them are reflected in Gaelic tradition. We have *gealach an fhoghair*, the harvest moon in October, and *gealach an t-sealgair*, the hunter's moon in November. The 'Fruit Moon' of September is I think reflected in Gaelic *sultuin(e)*, 'fat time', now the name for September itself. But the one that interests me most is the 'Wolf Moon' of February, because in Gaelic we have the *faoilleach* at that time of year. I have long believed *faoilleach* to mean originally 'leavings', but I have always translated it 'wolftime' because that is what I believe the people themselves understood it to mean, given that *faol* was a wolf.

Finally, what's the Gaelic for 'once in a blue moon', Coinneach wanted to know? All I could think of was this: *nuair bheir na cait an connadh dhachaigh*, 'when the cats bring home the fuel'. Can somebody please suggest something better?

The full saying as given by Nicolson in his 'Gaelic Proverbs' is actually: *Là Fheill Brìghde bàine, bheir na cait an connadh dhachaigh*, which he translates as: "On fair St Bride's day the cats will bring home the brush-wood." But there's something wrong with it — such sayings usually rhyme, yet this one doesn't. However, all is not lost. Nicolson adds: "Another saying, apparently better founded, associates this with St Patrick's day . . ."

St Patrick's Day sayings usually begin: *Là Fheill Pàdraig earraich* . . . "St Patrick's Day of spring . . ." *Là Fheill Brìghde earraich* or *Là Fheill Pàdraig earraich* would give us the rhyme we need.

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