

Christmas shopping, old style

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW years ago I had quite a lot to say on this page about old Highland fairs. In the days before roads and railways there were no shops as we know them today. Communities were largely self-sufficient, and such trade as there was was carried on by *ceannaichean siubhail* or pedlars who went from door to door and also set up a stall at weekly markets and annual fairs that were held at recognised times and places.

Many of the fairs bear names that are very ancient. They might be named after commodities, or animals of a particular kind that might be traded, or some other activity or special feature. The name might denote a quarterday or some other non-religious calendar term like *Faidhir an Earraich*, the Spring Fair at Kenmore in Perthshire. Very commonly it was the name of a saint, as often as not a Celtic one who does not appear in the Roman calendar at all — this is proof of great antiquity. Or it might be some other religious festival.

From the late seventeenth century on, we also get fairs named after landlords or their families — Wemyss day at Dornoch, for example, is named after the wife of a Duke of Sutherland who happened to be a daughter of the Earl of Wemyss. And then there are fairs named after a place or a physical feature, such as the Croft Fair at Kirriemuir, which was presumably held on the croft-land behind the houses rather than on the street in front.

I would like to illustrate this by talking about some of the traditional fairs held in December. First there was a Clog Market at Comrie in Perthshire, held till about 1890 on the first Wednesday of December. A ‘clog’ in Scots is a log of wood, so at first I was tempted to assume that it had to do with a good supply of firewood and a Yule Log (*Cailleach*, in Gaelic), but now I think it’s just as likely that the word could represent Gaelic *clog* or *clag*, ‘a bell’. Airth in Stirlingshire had a ‘Whistle Fair’, Dundee had a ‘Bell’s Fair’, Kilwinning in Ayrshire had a ‘Bell’s Day’, and I suspect they may all have been so called because they started and finished to the sound of these instruments. In some places a bell sounded the start of selling, just as happens in the world’s largest and richest fair today, the Wall Street Stock Market: “No man to buy or sell before the ringing of the bell at 9 o’clock in the morning,” say the records of Banff in 1682.

The ‘Goose Market’ was the annual fair at Drummond, near what is now Evanton in Easter Ross, in the first week of December. It must have been a large and long-established gathering, for we are told in 1845 that the proprietor exacted no toll but maintained a guard ‘to prevent riots’. In 1791 the minister, Harry Robertson, explained: “As no geese are sold at it, the name Goose-market has probably taken its rise from an entertainment usually given by the gentlemen of the parish to the principal inhabitants on the second day of the market, where a goose (being then in season), always makes a part of the feast. On this occasion, there is no excess in drinking encouraged; and the company meet merely for the sake of social intercourse.”

It’s comforting to imagine that the Christmas goose was enjoyed in the North even in ‘the Days of the Fathers’. A moderate minister was once reputedly censured for eating it. One of the opposite inclination, the Rev. Murdoch MacKenzie of Elgin — said to have been so zealous that he swore to the Covenant fourteen times — searched the houses of that town at Christmas 1659 in an effort to root out the cooking of the pernicious bird. “These feathers,” he is alleged to have told the people, “will rise up against you one day.” Another story tells of an old lady whose Christmas dinner was boiling merrily over a blazing fire when she saw the minister coming to the door. She whipped the pot off the fire, but couldn’t think of any better place to hide it before the minister entered the door than under the bedcover. She was sitting at her spinning-wheel when he came in. He was so delighted to find that she ‘longed not for the flesh-pots of Egypt’ that he overstayed his welcome, and suddenly the bedclothes burst into flame.

At Fortingall in Perthshire, *Féill Céit nan Gobhar*, St Catherine’s Goat Fair, was held on 6 and 7 December. Drovers of goats were brought from Lochaber and the Braes of Rannoch, but there was much more to it than that, for it was by far the largest rural fair in the county. In his book ‘A Highland Parish’, Alexander Stewart wrote: “Even within our own memory it performed a very important function in the life of the community. Its main purpose was the settling of the business transactions of the year. It was there that the local merchants and tradesmen settled their accounts. To it resorted wholesale merchants and travellers from Dundee, Perth, Crieff and other centres to collect their accounts from the local shopkeepers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, joiners, tailors and other customers, and no doubt also to canvas for more business.”

This idea of settling accounts in December went very deep. With the year’s work done, it was considered very unlucky to enter the New Year in debt. My own adopted town of Peebles even had a fair in December specifically called the Siller Fair: “This is a settling-day among farmers and others for many transactions during the season,” says Chambers’s history of the town. “Lime, drainage materials, and other articles connected with farming, are paid for this day, which is accordingly the busiest day with the banks during the whole year.”

A fair bearing the strange name *Féill Éiteachain* was held annually at Ardgay in the Easter Ross parish of Kincardine on the third Tuesday after 1 November, Old Style — that is, the third Tuesday after 13 November in today’s calendar, pushing it latterly into December. The name is that of the *clach éiteig*, a white quartz stone which was its focus.

It was originally held at Kincardine parish church, which is a mile south of Ardgay along the shore of the Dornoch Firth, at the foot of a river called the *Allt Éiteachain*, originally noted by the Ordnance Survey as *Allt na h-Éiteig*. That is where the name *Éiteachan* belongs; it was only after the building of the Bonar Bridge in 1812 that Ardgay, being closer to the bridge-end, began to increase its population at the expense of the ancient focal point of the parish.

The stone was the key to the market, just as a market cross or some other sacred stone provided the legitimation for all the other traditional markets in Scotland. Bargains were sealed on the stone. It was said that it had originally come from Assynt, and that the market was held wherever the stone happened to be, and it's worth noting in that context that the timing of the principal market in Assynt was linked to that of the *Féill Éiteachain* — in the nineteenth century the only recognised fair at Inchnadamph was said to have been held 'on the fourth Thursday of November before the Kincardine market'.

Like other *clachan éiteig* (hectic stones) the Ardgay stone may have had healing powers. That would indicate a very good reason why the men of Assynt and Easter Ross would want to fight for it, and why people would flock to it wherever it was set up. By this argument, *éiteag* and *éiteachan* derive either from the word 'hectic' or, more likely, from the name of some Celtic saint; in any event, it would have been the saint's power that gave the charm its efficacy, and I suspect that it was used by being dipped in the water of *Allt Éiteachain* or *Allt na h-Éiteig*, the water being thus made curative, and the river named after the saint or the stone.

In his book 'The Celtic Place-Names of Scotland', Professor William Watson, who came from Boath just over the Struie, provided a convincing explanation of the name *Éiteag* in his discussion of the loch- and river-name Etive in Argyll. He began by pointing out that it meant 'foul one' or 'horrid one', and went on: "The lady who had this ugly name was really the goddess of the loch and river, and if we ask why she was so called, we have only to know the stormy and dangerous nature of the loch, and in particular to look at the formidable sea-cataract at its entrance, known as a' *Chonghail*, the Connel. She is still well known as *Éiteag*, a diminutive form, 'the little horrid one'.

"In literature, *éitig(h)* is coupled with *salach*, foul, of which it is nearly a synonym, and it is not by accident that *Éiteag*'s haunt is traditionally placed in *Gleann Salach*, Foul Glen, beyond Ardchattan . . . A man of my acquaintance declared that he knew a man who had met her in Glen Salach — after a funeral."

I would therefore suggest that the name of the *Féill Éiteachain* can be linked to the river- and loch-spirits which I discussed here earlier this year. They include Cuachag, Móróg, Seileag, Airceag, Niseag, Éireag and Speitheag. Of these, the first four (like the Argyll *Éiteag*) are west-coast names, the last three (like our Ross-shire *Éiteag*) are east-coast names.

'Pepper's Fair' was held at Dingwall on the Tuesday before Christmas, Old Style. First mentioned in 1837 as the Pepper Market, its Old Style dating shows that it already existed in 1752. In his account of the Ross-shire *feills*, as he calls them, in his book 'Echoes of the Glen', Colin MacDonald (1882–1957) said: "Then there were the more local markets — *Feill a' Pheabair* (The Pepper Market) was one; it died out in Ross-shire in the seventies."

I take it from this that it originated as a spice market aimed principally at the Christmas dinner-plate. The name 'Pepper's Fair' would have arisen by analogy with three other Dingwall markets, Janet's Fair, Colin's Fair and Martha's Fair. MacDonald seems to have regarded its name, or at least its function, as being replicated elsewhere, perhaps both within and outwith Ross-shire. But its original function is clear enough: stock could not necessarily be depended on to survive the winter, and every farmer slaughtered and salted down his winter supply of beef during the period between Martinmas (11 November) and Christmas.

Spices, and pepper in particular, were used to improve the flavour, and spiced beef was eaten at Christmas. In fact for many people Christmas was likely to be the only time when they tasted meat. One Christmas dish was simply crumbled oatcakes fried in butter, but another was fat brose, consisting of oatmeal porridge moistened with hot gravy or the hot fat broth in which a round of beef had been boiled, with small pieces of the beef floating around in the gravy or the broth.

Finally, three days after Christmas, on 28 December, the people of Wick went to St Tear's Fair. There was no such person as St Tear, however. The name refers to the Feast of the Holy Innocents (the children slain by Herod), presumably in Gaelic *Féill nan Deur* (there is, or was, *Ceall na nDér*, 'the Church of Tears', in Co. Tipperary). Describing a visit to Caithness in 1762, the Episcopalian bishop Robert Forbes wrote of the Chapel of St Tear: "The country people, to this very day, assemble here in the morning of the Feast of the Holy Innocents, and say their Prayers, bringing their Offerings along with them, some Bread, others Bread and Cheese, others Money, &c., and putting these into the Holes of the Walls. In the afternoon they get Music — a Piper or a Fiddler — and dance on the Green where the Chapel stands."

He went on: "The roof is off, but the walls are almost all entire. One of the late presbyterian preachers of Wick thought to have abolished this old practice; and for that end appointed a Diet of catechising in that corner of the Parish upon the day of the Holy Innocents, but not one attended him; all went, as usual, to St Tear's Chapel."

17 December 1999