

“The 3rd of September the 14th is nam’d”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LAST time I explained how Julius Caesar’s calendar was found by the sixteenth century to be gaining a day every 134 years and to have slipped by ten days against the sun. And how Pope Gregory fixed this in 1582 by dropping ten days and declaring that henceforth three of every four centurial years should not be a leap year — 1600 would be a leap year as usual, but 1700, 1800 and 1900 would not, 2000 would be a leap year as usual, but 2100, 2200 and 2300 would not, and so on.

The ‘New Style’ took much longer to be accepted in Protestant than in Catholic Europe, and it was not until 1751 that a bill was introduced in the UK Parliament proposing ‘An Act for Regulating the Commencement of the Year, and for Correcting the Calendar now in Use’.

The man behind the bill was Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773). His work on the calendar has helped gain him the reputation of a man of letters and an early example of the good European. Dr Johnson summed him up more accurately as having the manners of a dancing master but the morals of a whore. Johnson was a Tory, and Chesterfield a Whig. Johnson was right, as usual.

During the ’45 Chesterfield had been Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. He recommended genocide as the best way of putting down the Rebellion, suggested that a price be put on chiefs’ heads and that Cumberland massacre the peasantry, and urged a naval blockade to ensure that food supplies did not reach the starving Highlands. At the height of the Rebellion, when General Campbell was desperate for meal for his militia, Chesterfield banned the export of as much as an oatcake from Ireland, making no bones about his readiness, as he put it, to ‘starve the loyal with the disloyal’.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, in his book ‘The Calendar’ David Ewing Duncan takes the Whig view of Chesterfield. ‘A prominent intellectual,’ he calls him. ‘Famous for his wit and sophistication, and for his sagacious letters to his son and godson.’ Personally I see political similarities between Pope Gregory’s introduction of the new calendar in 1582 and the Whig Government’s in 1752. Both were corrupt administrations with their backs to the ropes after a rebellion, trying to make changes and come back out fighting.

Just as the Pope was trying to keep the lid on Protestantism, the Whigs were trying to keep the lid on Jacobitism. In 1751 there was seething discontentment with the King and his Government, and a real belief that a Stuart restoration was imminent. It was the year in which the great Gaelic poet Alexander MacDonald — Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair — published his book ‘Aiseirigh na Seann Chànain Albannaich’ (‘The Resurrection of the Ancient Scottish Tongue’), full of seditious verse and calls for a new rebellion in which Highlands and Lowlands would this time rise together. The authorities were very nervous, and copies of the book were said to have been burned by the common hangman at the mercat cross in Edinburgh.

That autumn Dr Cameron, Lochiel’s brother, mingled with the men of the west at the cattle market in Falkirk, quietly discussing arrangements for the new rising. The Earl Marischal was to land with Swedish troops and rendezvous with Jacobite leaders at the Crieff market. Alastair’s book may or may not have been burned, but Dr Cameron was most certainly hanged as a traitor at Tyburn in 1753. As a medical practitioner he was graciously spared the English practice in such cases of being cut down after a few minutes to see his own entrails hacked out and burned.

Against this background we can see the Calendar Act as something that would cost nothing, win friends, and show Thomas Pelham’s government to be progressive and caring. Whig merchants were keen to use the same calendar as their European trading partners. Many Tories, thanks to the ‘Grand Tour’, were coming to enjoy the kind of solidarity with the ruling classes of Europe which had scarcely existed since the time of the Spanish Armada. And the Jacobites — well, they could hardly complain, since they were plotting almost daily with European regimes.

The Bill went through its three readings, was passed unanimously on 17 May 1751, and received the Royal seal on 22 May. The self-satisfied Chesterfield claimed that it was his own style that had carried the measure, and not the content of what he had said in the House about mathematics and science, which ‘he himself could not understand’. The truth is that it had nothing to do with Chesterfield at all except as a competent administrator. Like the decimalisation of the currency in 1971, since every other country in Europe that mattered had already done it, it was nothing but a chore which everyone had now finally accepted could not be put off any longer.

Unlike Pope Gregory in 1582, who had given the whole of Europe a mere six months’ warning, the British Government allowed a decent amount of preparation time. Wednesday 2 September 1752 was to be followed by Thursday 14 September 1752. The London ‘Ladies Diary or Woman’s Almanack’ for 1752 contained this loyal ode to Parliament’s wisdom:

*The third of September the fourteenth is nam’d,
For which, British Annals will ever be fam’d;
For by Wisdom and Art to the House made appear,
The Sun was reduc’d to attend on the Year;
His Julian Vagaries long Time has he known;
But has now got a new-bridal Year of his own.*

Note how the ‘Ladies Dairy’ writer dreamed up a ‘woman’s angle’ in the way the sun goes from being the mere

servant of a calendar year to marrying one himself! But the 'Diary' lived up to its claim of 'Containing an Improvement of ARTS and SCIENCES, For the Use and Pleasure of the FAIR-SEX', for it also launched into an explanation of the change very much in terms of Chesterfield's Act — presumably using whatever passed in 1751 for a 'press handout'. It is quite a helpful digest of the whole issue. "By 365 Days, 6 Hours, the mean Julian Year, being long reckon'd for 365d. 5h. 48m. 54s. 41thirds 27 fourths, the Year by the Sun, according to Dr. Halley, (See *Palladium* 1750, p. 53.), the Account of Time has each Year run a-head of Time by the Sun 11m. 5s. 18 thirds 33 fourths, or 44m. 21s. 34 thirds 12 fourths, every 4 Years, and consequently 3d. 1h. 55m. 23s. 40 thirds in 400 Years.

"And so from the Council of Nice, when the Kalendar was settled, in the Year 325, to this present Year 1752, being 1427 Years, the Time by Account is forward of that by the Sun 10d. 23h. 43m. and therefore 11 Days is left out of Account, in this Month, as the most convenient, for reducing the Kalendar or Year to its first establish'd Order.

"And for keeping the shortest and longest Days (or the Solstices) and also the Days of 12h. long (or the Equinoxes) on the same nominal Days of the Month for the future, it is ordain'd by Act of Parliament, that every fourth hundred Year is to consist of 366 Days as usual, but all other whole hundred Years of 365 Days only: The Years between which whole hundreds to be common and *Bissextile* as formerly, and the Date of the Year henceforward to begin on the first of *January*."

These, then, are the explanations of the 'Ladies Diary' for the three main provisions of Chesterfield's Act. (1) Eleven days were to be lost. (2) Beginning in 2000, every fourth centurial year was to be a leap year as usual, but every other centurial year was to have 365 days only. An entire day had been lost against the Gregorian calendar in 1700, which was of course a leap year in the Julian Calendar but not in the Gregorian, and that was why eleven days were now having to be left out rather than ten. And (3), quite separately, the New Year in England, Wales, Ireland and the Colonies was to be on 1 January rather than 25 March.

This final point brought English law into line with popular custom — 25 March (the Annunciation) had been declared the start of the year by the Church in the early Middle Ages, but the people had never abandoned Julius Caesar's edict that the year would start on 1 January, so the term 'New Year's Day' had never ceased to mean 1 January.

It also brought English law into line with Scots Law. I have before me a transcript of a proclamation on the matter issued at Haliruidhous on 17 December 1599. It is an interesting document, and I can't resist quoting it. "The Kingis Majestie, and Lordis of His Secreit Counsall, undirstanding, that in all utheris weill governit commoun welthis and cuntreyis, the first day of the yeir begynis yeirlye upoun the first day of Januare, commonlie callit New Yearis Day, and that this realme onlie is different fra all utheris, in the compt and reckning of the yeiris:

"And his Majestie and Counsall, willing that thair salbe na disconformitie betuix his Majestie, his realme, and leigis, and utheris nichtbour cuntreyis in this particular, bot that thay sall conforme thameselffis to the ordour and custum observit be all utheris cuntreyis, especialie seing the course and seasoun of the yeir, is maist propir and ansuerabill thairto, and that the alteratioun thairof, importis na hurte nor prejudice to ony pairtie:

"Thairfoir His Majestie, with advise of the Lordis of his Secreit Counsall, Statutis and Ordanis, That in all tyme cuming, the first day of the yeir sal begin yierlye upoun the first day of Januar, and thir presentis to tak executioun upoun the first of Januare nixtocum, quhilk salbe the first day of the Im and six hundredth yeir of God [1600]:

"And thairfoir Ordanis and Commandis the Clarkis of his Hienis Sessioun an Signet, the Directour and writtaris of the Chancellarie and Prevey Seall, and all utheris Jugeis, writtaris, notaris and clerkis within this realme, That they and everie ane of thame in all tyme heirefter date all thair decreittis, infetmentis, charteris, seasingis, letteris, and writtis quhatsumevir, according to this present ordinance, Compting the first day of the yeir fra the first day of Januare yeirlye, and the first day the Im and vjc yeir of God [1600], fra the first day of Januare nixtocum:

"And ordanis publicatioun to be maid heirof at the mercat croceis of the heid burrowis of the realme, quhairthrow nane pretend ignorance of the same."

It can only mean that James VI understood that Queen Elizabeth had announced that the New Year would be changed to 1 January in line with Pope Gregory's calendar. Whether deliberately or not, the English Ambassador had seriously misled him. In 1603 when he became King of England he found himself in charge of two realms with the same popular New Year but different official ones.

It was Chesterfield who finally rectified that situation a century and a half later. But even in 1753 there was one exception. Terrified of anything that might lead to the loss of tax revenue, the Exchequer stuck grimly to the old New Year of 25 March. More fundamentally still, the bewigged Gordon Brown of the day simply refused to write off eleven days of income, and observed 25 March eleven days later than everyone else.

Which is why the UK income tax year begins on 5 April to this day.

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