

“Whose Calendar but the cursed Campbells’!”

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN my last article I showed how in 1752 the Government made the conversion from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian by declaring that the 3rd of September that year would be called the 14th. Eleven days were being lost to bring the UK into line with Europe.

Apprehension during the countdown to 3 September was akin to our fears over the Millennium Bug. Not that the Whig Government had failed to plan the operation. The Calendar Act states clearly that all court dates, holidays, ‘Meetings and Assemblies of any Bodies Politick or Corporate’, elections, and all official obligations according to ‘Law, Statute, Charter, Custom or Usage’ shall be ‘computed according to the said new method of numbering and reckoning the Days of the Calendar as aforesaid, that is to say, 11 Days sooner than the respective Days whereon the same are now holden and kept’.

Other things were more tricky, especially where money was concerned, and in this respect the Act was not so successful. Periodic economic events such as markets, fairs, hiring days for servants, days for the payment of rents, usages of property, contracts, and deadlines for the delivery of goods were all supposed to be brought forward, but without wages or interest being paid for the lost eleven days. This is by no means what happened in practice, and many markets, fairs, term-days and so on continued to be held on their ‘Old Style’ dates, that is, eleven days ‘late’ according to the new reckoning — Old New Year’s Day on 12 January, for example.

By contrast, the Act stipulated, in effect, that there was to be no such thing as a free lunch. Soldiers about to be discharged from the army had to serve the number of days stipulated in the first place, as did indentured servants reaching the end of their contracts, and criminals about to be released from jail. And if you were coming of age and about to receive your inheritance, you had to wait the full number of days for that too, just as if there had been no change in the calendar at all.

Needless to say there was grumbling. William Coxe, editor of Prime Minister Thomas Pelham’s memoirs, wrote: “Many landholders, tenants and merchants were apprehensive of difficulties in regard to rents, leases, bills of exchange and debts dependent on periods fixed by the Old Style . . . Greater difficulty was, however, found in appeasing the clamour of the people against the supposed profaneness of changing the saints’ days in the Calendar and altering the time of all the immoveable feasts.”

In quoting this, David Ewing Duncan says in his book ‘The Calendar’ that in London and elsewhere mobs collected in the streets and shouted, “Give us back our eleven days.” In Bristol, he claims, ‘riots over the reform apparently ended up with people killed’. Writers on the calendar are fond of making such claims, but they seem to have little basis in fact. For example, anti-Catholic or anti-Jacobite rent-a-mob riots were not unknown at the time, and there was a rhyme:

*In seventeen hundred and fifty-three
The style it was changed to Popery.*

The very fact that the date given is 1753, not 1752 when the days were actually lost, tells us that the issue was a political one that ran and ran, rather than a popular one that exploded into violence. The point is underlined by a Hogarth etching of an election meeting in Oxfordshire in 1754, which shows a banquet being thrown for the people by two Whig candidates, with people eating, a doctor tending to an injured man, musicians playing, and a man being hit on the head by a brick tossed by parading Tories. Lying on the floor at the feet of the wounded man is a poster: “GIVE US BACK OUR ELEVEN DAYS.”

It was certainly easier for those who lived in a world of reading and writing to cope than it was for those whose world was governed by crops, growth, labour, weather, seasons, saints’ days and proverbial wisdom. In Bristol one John Latimer reported that the Glastonbury thorn, which blossomed every year on Christmas Day, ‘contemptuously ignored the new style’ on 25 December 1752, but ‘burst into blossom on the 5th January, thus indicating that Old Christmas Day should alone be observed, in spite of an irreligious legislature’.

In the Highlands the change became known as *toirt a-staigh an ùir*, ‘the bringing in of the new’, but the Calendar Act made little imprint at first on a people whose calendar was still very firmly rooted in the seasons and who had other things on their minds after Culloden. Campbell of Glenure had been assassinated, and criminal letters had been served on *Seumas a’ Ghlinne*, James Stewart ‘of the Glen’, on 21 August.

The trial was fixed for 21 September at Inveraray. At any other moment in human affairs this would have provided exactly a month in which to prepare a defence, but of course such was not the case. In fact the chips were very thoroughly stacked against the accused. He was to be tried for murder of a Campbell by a Campbell jury in the Campbell capital. It naturally proved difficult to secure counsel who would make the long journey to Inveraray during the vacation, and who would act against the Government in a case involving keen political feeling. Travelling consumed valuable days. September 2 came and went, and next day it was the 14th. When the agent reached Argyll he had first to go on to Duror of Appin to examine his client’s papers, so counsel and agent did not hold their first conference at Inveraray till the evening of Monday 18 September.

James was duly found guilty. He was hanged at Ballachulish in his home country on 8 November. Soldiers mounted guard over the corpse to prevent the Stewarts taking it for burial. As D N Mackay wrote, “When the Old New Year came round (that first of Old New Years) the soldiers were still shivering at their strange sentry duty.” The skeleton remained, wired together and chained to the gallows, till 1755, when it was secretly removed; the gibbet was thrown into the sea but kept being washed ashore at places called Port na Croise, ‘the Port of the Cross’ (in Appin and Morvern), until it was finally made into a bridge.

The fate of Seumas a' Ghlinne fired the imagination of Inveraray-born Neil Munro. His short story 'Young Pennymore' was set in "the year of the stunted corn — 1752 — and never in the memory of man had been such inclement weather. The seas would seem to have forgotten the ways of peace; the glens were flooded, and the Highlands for a space were cut off from the Lowland world, and in a dreary privacy of storm."

Seumas a' Ghlinne becomes John Clerk, younger of Pennymore, sentenced to hang at Inveraray on 5 September for 'being actor or art and part in the death of the Captain of Clonary, who was shot on his way from Culloden by a gang of lurking Jacobites of whom the lad was one, and maybe innocent'. His parents try to secure a reprieve, but fail. On the morning of 4 September (or so they think) they head in the dark for Inveraray. Their harness breaks, and Pennymore goes on into town to get a rope. While he is there, his wife finds a hanged man. When he returns, his wife says to him: "You're a day behind the fair."

"Not one day, but eleven of them," he replies. "It is the fifteenth of September, and I'm so fearful of the worst. I dared not rap at a door in the town and ask."

"The fifteenth of September," she repeated; "we have not slept so sound this month back that we could miss a fortnight. Have you lost your reason?"

"I have seen a placard put up on the mercat cross. I read it in the light of the tolbooth windows, and it tells that the Government have decreed that the day after September 2nd should be September 14th. Eleven days are dropped; it is called — it is called the Gregorian Calendar, and I have forgotten about the rope."

"Gregorian here, Gregorian there! Whose Calendar but the cursed Campbells', who have bonnily diddled me of my son!"

The anguished mother gets her husband to murder the Campbell lawyer who has let them down, or so they believe. Going through his pockets, they find their son's reprieve — he was in the act of bringing it to them. Only then do they discover that the hanged man is not their son at all.

The Julian calendar is still in use in the Eastern Orthodox and Coptic churches, and now lags thirteen days behind the Gregorian, so New Year's Day, for example, was celebrated in much of eastern Europe on 14 January. Secular Russia did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until after the Revolution of 1917. In Gaelic Scotland the time-scale was similar, if a little more gradual. From 1752 to 1800 the Gaelic (i.e. Julian or Old Style) calendar lagged eleven days behind the Gregorian. 1800 was a leap year in the Julian but not the Gregorian system. That some, but not all, of the Gaelic-speaking people made an effort to adapt at this point is suggested by this rhyme:

*An Nollaig mu dheireadh den cheud
[Cha] chuir sinn an àireamh nam mìos.*

("The last Old Christmas (i.e. New Year) of the century / We have put [or We won't put] in the reckoning of the months.") Among the descendants of those who did not put that last Old Christmas into the reckoning, or who otherwise forewent that day in 1800, the Gaelic calendar continued to lag eleven days behind the Gregorian.

Among the descendants of those who did, and claimed their extra day, the difference widened to twelve days. It is a little surprising, therefore, to find a Perthshire Gaelic-speaker, James Macintyre, referring in 1808–35 to '*Latha Nullaig*, Christmas Day: the 25th day of December, or 4th of our January, according to the old style', and to Old New Year's Day falling sometimes on 11 January. This is only a ten-day loss, while elsewhere he allows for an eleven- or twelve-day loss, as we would expect for someone whose lifetime straddled the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1783–1835). The reason, I suspect, is that leap years were still being observed in the Highlands according to the ancient intercalary principle, that is, by treating 31 December (rather than 29 February) as an intercalary day appearing only once in four years. The gap, thus reduced to ten days, would extend to eleven days again a couple of months later when 29 February was kept in the Old Style but leapt in the New Style.

1900 appears to have been almost universally observed according to the Gregorian system as an ordinary and not a leap year, leaving the gap at twelve days; only a pedant would now call it thirteen, and this will remain true until 2100 as 2000 is a leap year under both calendars. By 1912, in any case, Henry Whyte was able to observe: "In some parts of the Highlands — especially in the Hebrides — there is a lingering regard for the old style, particularly with reference to the observance of Christmas and New Year's day, but the old is fast giving way before the new, and a few years will see the adoption of the new style throughout Gaeldom."

Thus it was that the Old Style lasted into the memory of many people still living, so that for example a R.C. priest has told me of a 90-odd-year-old parishioner of his in Wester Ross in the late 1960s who could not completely reconcile herself to the the new calendar even then, always pining in particular for the proper celebration of New Year on Old New Year's Day.

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