

The noblest day that's coming or past by

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

LATHA Fhéill Moire an t-Sanais, 'the Feast Day of Mary of the Annunciation', commemorates the mystery of Christ's annunciation and incarnation. Held on 25 March (tomorrow), nine months before Christmas, it was better known to Protestants as *Latha na Cailliche* or 'Lady Day'. A rhyme from South Uist tells us:

*Latha Fhéill Moire na h-Éill Pàdraig,
An latha as uaisle thig no thàinig.*

('Annunciation Day of St Patrick's time, / The noblest day that's coming or past by.') But why was it so *uasal*, so noble?

Firstly, it was a busy time. *Reothairt na Féill Moire, agus boile na Féill Pàdraig*, goes another saying — 'the spring-tide of the Annunciation, and the frenzy of St Patrick's'. From the Annunciation come 'Our Lady day' in Thurso and 'Lady Day in Lent' in Fochabers, the latter of which survived till about 1890 as a cattle and horse market on the fourth Wednesday of March. A week-long fair called 'Our Lady Day in Lentrone' was established at Nairn in 1589, and subsequently also outside the burgh at Geddes (1600) and Rorichies (1661). By 1727, at least, Lady Day fairs were held at Banff, Auchtermuchty, West Wemyss and Carnwath on 23 March, and at Dunkeld on 25 March. Like the other Dunkeld fairs, it was recorded in the 1790s as having an armed guard provided by the Duke of Atholl; in the 1790s it was for yarn and horses and by 1845 it was for cattle and the hiring of servants.

The Lady Fair at Crieff was held (at least after 1752) on the first Thursday of April. Finally, Lady Day at Anstruther Wester, first mentioned in 1587, is the forerunner of the Anster Lintseed Market (held by 1812 on 11 April or on one of the six following days) which inspired William Tennant's poem 'Anster Fair', a riotous celebration of spring and abundance.

Secondly, some of the highest tides of the year are around now. They were variously called *Reothairt na Féill Pàdraig* or *Reothairt na Féill Moire* or *Reothairt Mór nan Eun* ('the Great Spring-Tide of the Birds'). They bring a large amount of seaweed ashore and leave it higher than any other tide, so providing sea-birds with a safe place to make their nests — by the time another one comes as high their young will have been safely reared. *Ciamar nach do mhair an reothairt*, says Sorley MacLean in one of his poems, *bu bhuidhe dhomh na do na h-èidin?* 'How did the spring-tide not last, the spring-tide more golden (lucky) to me even than to the birds?' Another version of one of those sayings is *reothairt mór na h-Éill Moire 's bòlaich na h-Éill Pàdraig*, 'the big spring-tide of the Annunciation and the swell of the sea on St Patrick's'.

Thirdly, for a large part of our history the Annunciation governed the year. Let me explain.

Till Julius Caesar's time the calendar was in confusion. The Romans began with only ten named months, which is why September, October, November and December (the 'Seventh', 'Eighth', 'Ninth' and 'Tenth' Months) are now the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth. January and February, the 'doorkeeping month' and the 'month of expiation', were added about 700 BC. In 46 BC Caesar ordered the whole empire to use the same calendar. The year was to have twelve months consisting of 365 days and an extra day every four years. And it was to begin on 1 January.

This idea that the year began on 1 January became deeply ingrained in the minds of the people, nowhere more so than in Scotland. With the gradual defeat of paganism, however, Christian thinkers began to question why the year should begin on a date fixed by a pagan general who was shabbily murdered a little before Christ was born. What is more, the Latin language had become so dominant as a binding force in the life of the Church that it made little sense for September, the 'seventh' month, to be the ninth, and so on. (You can imagine endless monkish disputations about that.) And anyway, when in the year was it right to stop looking back and start looking forward?

The principle options, other than 1 January itself, were 1 March, 25 March, Easter and 25 December. The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 had declared that the spring equinox fell on 25 March, which became the Annunciation. So the winter solstice fell on 25 December, the Day of Christ's Nativity, nine months later.

The Annunciation was the time not merely of the appearance of Christ in Mary's womb, but of the sowing of seed in general, of calving, and of lambing. What is more it fell in Lent, which Ronald Hutton has called (in his book 'The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain') a seven week period of fasting, self-denial and spiritual doubt, culminating in the rejoicing of the most important of all Christian festivals — Easter. Being the busiest time of year, relaxation and celebration were hardly appropriate, says Hutton, and he goes on: "The bounds of the fast were standardized for the Church in western Europe by Pope Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century, to exclude meat, milk, cheese, butter, and eggs. These regulations were susceptible to amendment in areas where alternative foodstuffs were not available, and especially where the authority of Rome was not fully recognized: at the Scottish island monastery of Iona in the seventh century, the monks ate nothing during the day and supped upon bread, milk, and eggs.

"In the late tenth-century English capitula of Archbishop Aelfric all food was interdicted until after evensong except for the old and the sick, and then 'delicious meat', cheese, eggs, fish, and wine were prohibited. The capitula also bade people to confess their sins every Sunday, and to avoid fighting and sexual intercourse.

"In the 1020s Canute put the royal law behind the ban upon violence and sex, with fines as the penalty for culprits. By Aelfric's time the restrictions were already sufficiently well enforced for people to be loosening them in ways of which he disapproved, such as ending the complete fast at noon, or believing that all or some of the regulations could be ignored by people who gave enough alms. By the late Middle Ages the scope of the fast was fixed to exclude meat, eggs, and cheese, and the principal prohibition of social activity was that nobody could

marry or make love.”

It made the Annunciation a dignified time of year, whose austerities were compensated for by the lengthening of the day, the warmth of the sun, the sparkle of the sea, the quickening of life, the appearance of new grass, the colours of spring flowers. And at some point towards the end of spring would come Easter Day, the Risen Christ, certainty and hope, release from toil, and the end of the fast.

That then is some of the background to medieval legislation on New Year's Day. I have found information on what was actually decided in two books, both of which are still in print — John J Bond's 'Handy-Book of Rules and Tables for Verifying Dates' of 1869, and C R Cheney's 'Handbook of Dates for Students of English History' of 1945.

The Venerable Bede (c.673–735), a logical Englishman, simply took it for granted that the year must begin with the Nativity, Christmas Day. His practice was widely followed by the Anglo-Saxon and Norman kings of England, and in most of Western Europe for half a millennium. So according to Bond the year began on 25 December in Mainz until the 10th century, in Provence from the 11th to the 13th centuries, in the Diocese of Soissons in the 13th century, in most of Italy in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, in Cologne in 1310, in the Dauphiny in the 14th century (from which it was called *le Style Delphinal*), in Aragon from 1350, in Castile from 1383, in Portugal from 1420, in Poitou, Guienne, Normandy and Anjou after these provinces fell into the hands of the English, in Prussia till 1558, in Denmark before 1559, in Narbonne and the Pays de Foix before 1564, and in Lorraine before 1579.

Says Cheney: “Although the Church preferred one of its own major festivals to mark the beginning of the year and wished to make a break with pagan antecedents, 1 January was occasionally treated as the beginning of the year of grace in the Middle Ages.” Bond shows that the year began on 1 January in Mainz after the 10th century, in England and Ireland from 1067 to 1154, in Provence from the 11th to the 13th centuries, in Picardy after the 13th century, in Aragon before 1350, in Castile till 1383, in Switzerland in the 14th and 15th centuries, in Portugal before 1420, in Besançon in the 15th century, and in Montbelliard before 1564. In Venice before 1522 it marked the beginning of the civil year only.

In Russia in the 11th century the year began some time during the spring, after which the Greek calendar was adopted. In Venice before 1522 the legal (as opposed to the civil) year began on 1 March.

The practice of beginning the year at the Annunciation may have been established at the Abbey of Fleury, given that it appears to have been largely responsible for inventing the cult of the Virgin Mary. According to Bond the year began on 25 March in England and Ireland at different times from the 6th century onwards, in Tuscany from the 10th century, in Provence from the 11th to the 13th centuries, in Languedoc before the 12th century, in Rheims from the 12th century, in England again from 1155 to 1751, in the Dauphiny towards the end of the 13th century, at Cologne University until 1428, in Besançon before the 15th century, in the Swiss cantons of Lausanne and Vaud from the 15th century to 1738, in Montbelliard before 1564, in Lorraine before 1579, in Montdidier till the 16th century, and in Scotland down to 1599. That is a big list.

According to Cheney the reckoning of the year from Easter was introduced into the French chancery by Philip Augustus (1180–1223). It spread to some regions such as Holland and Cologne where the French dynasty had family or trading connections, but never became uniform for the whole of France, or popular outside court circles. The year began on Easter Eve in Languedoc in the 12th and 13th centuries, in Amiens and Peronne in the 13th century, and in Toulouse until 1564; it began on Easter Day and 25 March in Provence in the 11th to 13th centuries, in the Diocese of Limoges in 1301, and in Cologne before 1310. That is bad enough, but the additional disadvantages — given that Easter can fall at any time from 21 March to 25 April — are obvious. Cheney remarks, quoting R L Poole's 'Medieval Reckonings of Time', that if Philip chose Easter because he 'desired to mark his conquest of the English possessions in France by the use of a style different from those which had been current in them', he could hardly have made a gesture more disconcerting to his own subjects.

Finally, the year began on 11 August (the feast of St Tiburce), as an occasional alternative to Christmas, in Denmark before 1559. Long before that, various chroniclers began the year on 1, 24 or 29 September, the last of these being Michaelmas.

The results of all this were pretty confusing. Between 1600 and 1751 if you rode from Scotland into England between 1 January and 25 March you re-entered the previous year, but that was nothing compared to the Continent. Wrote Poole: “If we suppose a traveller to set out from Venice on March 1, 1245, the first day of the Venetian year, he would find himself in 1244 when he reached Florence; and if after a short stay he went on to Pisa, the year 1246 would have already begun there. Continuing his journey westward, he would find himself again in 1245 when he entered Provence, and on arriving in France before Easter (April 16) he would be once more in 1244.”

That is why in 1582 the Catholic Church finally gave up its attempt to turn the Annunciation into New Year's Day. That, too, is why Samuel Pepys, who reckoned the years of his diary from 25 March, never failed to mention New Year's Day when he got to 1 January.

WHFP 24 March 2000