

All the movable feasts

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I SEE from the papers that Prince Charles has given up eating lunch for Lent. His spokeswoman, Colleen Harris, said: “The prince has given up lunch for Lent. That is what he chose to give up. He does not enjoy eating in the middle of the day very much. He does still have breakfast and dinner.”

Apparently this caused a slight problem for him on Tuesday 28 March when he had to make a speech at a lunch at Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire in honour of British beef. On the menu were beef sandwiches, burgers, carapaccio, minute steak, brisket, beef wellington, stroganoff and kebabs.

What a dilemma. Conscience or duty. Church or state. Middle Age Spread or Middle England Expects.

Anyway the prince got through his nightmare somehow and leaves this column reflecting on the value of the Lenten fast. I, too, gave up lunch some time ago and breakfast as well, although to relieve the boredom of my dull life I occasionally indulge in a piece of toast with a scraping of Moniack Castle Marmalade. (Ah, that princely power to endorse a favourite product.)

Funny, isn't it, but in times when most people could hardly ever get enough to eat the Church imposed an obligatory forty-day fast, and that at the very point in the year when, in the Highlands and Islands at least, folk were already staring at the bare bottom of the meal-kist. The Reformers swept all that away and very sensible they were too.

But now things have changed. In the western world we eat too much. We are obsessed with being slim. We go on diets. So what does the Catholic Church do at this point, round about Good Pope John's time in the 1960s? It relaxes the Lenten Fast and makes it optional, by 1966 reducing the obligation to two days only, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. I take it that this is the position in the Anglican Church too, and that when Charles guzzled his carapaccio last week it was a strictly private matter between him and his stomach.

Ms Harris went on to add, in her spokespersonlike way, that the prince had given up eating lunch on Ash Wednesday and was expected to continue his sacrifice until Easter Sunday. ‘The Scotsman’ reported this as if it were front page news (that is, it was on the front page), but all Ms Harris had provided really was a definition of when Lent begins and ends. It was what the newspapers have been dutifully reporting about princes since roughly AD 325 when the Council of Nicaea decided these things in the first place.

I am talking here not just about Lent but about the whole strange sequence of movable feasts that hinged on the date of Easter. These are part of the heritage of all of us who live in Scotland, no matter whether we are Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Catholic or anything else. There are good things in there, there are things we should know about because they have to do with the lives of ordinary people, and there are also things that became secularised and long survived the Reformation, such as the names of fairs. So let me use this article to give a little digest of them, discuss the meaning of their names in English and Gaelic, and say when they happen to fall this year.

Shrove Tuesday, Fasten's E'en, Di-Màirt Inid, 7 March. This was the last day of freedom before Lent and was a day of uproarious feasting and merriment, every bit as much in Gaelic Scotland at one time as in Brazil's Mardi Gras today. ‘Shrove’, as Ronald Hutton says in his book ‘The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain’, was from ‘shriving’ or confession of sins and receipt of absolution, so that congregations could go into Lent with clean consciences; but ‘going shroving’ came to mean something very different!

*At Shroftide go shroving, go threshe the fat hen,
If blindfold can kill her, then give it thie men.*

People liked to go from house to house eating and drinking as much as they could. Sixteenth-century accounts for English and Scottish royal revels show regular and heavy expenditure on plays, music and masquerades for Shrove Tuesday, and in 1571 an English Protestant preacher in 1571 characterised Shrovetide in general as a time of ‘great gluttony, surfeiting and drunkenness’. Fasten's (or Fastern's) Eve (or E'en) was simply the Lowland term for the eve of the fast, and many Scots fairs bore the name down to the nineteenth century. The Gaelic term *Inid* is from Latin *initium* and means ‘beginning’.

*Thig an oidhche roimhn là
A h-uile là ach Là Inid.*

(‘The night comes before the day / Every day except Shrove Day.’) Every other holy day is, or was, preceded by a fast, just as, scripturally, night precedes day — the night before *Samhain* (All Hallows' Day) is *Oidhche Shamhna* (Hallowe'en), the night before *Nollaig* (Christmas) is *Oidhche Nollaig* (Christmas Eve), and so on. But *Oidhch' Inid* follows *Là Inid*.

*Oidhch' Inid
Bidh feòil againn
'S bu chòir dhuinn sin,
Bu chòir dhuinn sin.*

(‘On Shrove night / We'll have meat / And so we should / And so we should.’) Finally fasting begins at midnight.

Ash Wednesday, Di-Ciadaoin na Luaithre, 8 March. The first day of Lent, so called in both English and Gaelic from the custom of daubing the people's foreheads with ashes from the palms of the previous year's Palm Sunday.

Lent, An Carghas, 8 March to 23 April. The English term seems to derive simply from the ‘lengthening’ of the day at this time of year — Anglo-Saxon *lencten* was effectively a word for spring. In the days before electric light this lengthening used to be very noticeable. Ewen MacLachlan made much of it in his great poem on spring, describing March as

*Mios cabhagach, oibreach, saothrach
Nam feasgar slaod-chianail reangach.*

(‘Month of hurry, work, and toil / Full of long lingering evenings.’) The Gaelic term *Carghas* by contrast is from Latin ‘quadragesima’, meaning forty days. (That -g- is soft by the way: ‘jess’, not ‘guess’.) There were forty days of fast in Lent — all the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Saturday but excluding the six Sundays.

Palm Sunday, *Di-Dòmhnach Shlat Pailm*, 16 April. The start of Easter Week. The Gaelic term means ‘Palm Branch Sunday’. It commemorates Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, and was marked by the gathering and display of branches — not of palm in this country, of course, but of willow, of yew, of hazel, or anything else, though evergreens were naturally preferred.

Spy Wednesday, *Di-Ciadaoin a’ Bhrath*, 19 April. Wednesday of Easter Week was remembered as the day on which Christ was betrayed by Judas Iscariot. *Brath* means ‘spying’ or ‘betrayal’, ‘information’, ‘word’ or even ‘message’. In an elegy on John MacLeod of Dunvegan, who died on Spy Wednesday in 1693, his blind harper (the Lewisman John Morrison) makes this sad play on the word:

*Ann an seachdain na Ceusta,
Di-Ceudaoin mo bhristidh,
Chaill mi iuchair na feudail . . .
. . . Gun brath faighinn gu brath oirr’ . . .*

(‘In Easter week, / On the Wednesday of my ruin, / I lost the key to riches . . . / . . . Without a *brath* of ever finding it . . .’)

Maundy Thursday, **Holy Thursday**, **Skyre Thursday**, *Diar-Daoin Bangaid*, *Diar-Daoin a’ Bhrochain Mhóir*, 20 April. This is such a big collection of names that I had better leave them till next time. What comes across clearly from the Gaelic ones is that this is the day that commemorates the last supper.

Good Friday, *Di-Haoine na Ceusta*, 21 April. The day that commemorates the crucifixion and that is exactly what the Gaelic term tells us.

Easter Sunday, **Pasch Sunday**, *Di-Dòmhnach Càisge*, 23 April. It may not look like it, but the Lowland term ‘Pasch’ and the Gaelic term *Càisge* are one and the same. They both derive from Latin *pascha*, as in the ‘paschal lamb’ and so on, and *pascha* in turn is from Hebrew *pesach*, the Passover. ‘Pasch’ and *Càisge* tell you something about the sounds P and C in Gaelic, but the really interesting question here is, as Hutton puts it, why the Germanic-speaking areas of Europe, in sharp contrast to the others, failed to take their name for the greatest festival of the Christian year from the Passover and named it after an obscure term of their own instead. ‘Easter’ a German goddess? Watch this space.

Easter Monday, **Pasch Monday**, *Di-Luain Càisge*, 24 April. Lent and long services were all over at last, and this was a day to relax and celebrate. *Cha b’e sin mo Luan Càisge*, declared the poet Eachann Bacach in an elegy on his chief Sir Lachlan MacLean, *Nuair a bhuaill an gath bàis thu*: ‘That was no Easter Monday for me when the dart of death struck you.’

Low Sunday, *Di-Dòmhnach Mion-Chàisge*, 30 April. This is the Sunday after Easter, so called, as Chambers’ dictionary puts it, ‘in contrast to the great festival whose octave it ends’. The Romans, and therefore also the medieval Church, always counted days by including the first as well as the last, so an ‘octave’ is what you and I would call a week. The Gaelic term means ‘Sunday of Little Easter’. Easter Sunday was sometimes called *Càisge Mhór*, ‘Big Easter’. In the same way there were *Nollaig Mhór*, ‘Big Christmas’, and *Nollaig Bheag*, ‘Little Christmas’, Little Christmas being New Year’s Day. I think it was a matter of feast and famine. If you slaughtered a beast for the big feast you were still eating it down to the little one. Even when Lent was over you would keep some of the best bits for the Sunday table rather than eating them all during the week.

Another name for Low Sunday was *Càisge nam Bodach*. It seems to mean ‘Old Men’s Easter’, but as *bodaich* used to be a word for serfs I suspect that in the old days it meant ‘the Servants’ Easter’ and was a way of thanking those who had had to work through the holiday — we are told that it was distinguished only by a better feast than usual in the house. Maybe this can help us understand *Nollaig Mhór* and *Nollaig Bheag* too.

Ascension Thursday, *Diar-Daoin Deasghabhail*, 1 June. According to Acts 1: 3 the withdrawal of Christ into heaven took place forty days after the Resurrection. Counting the Roman way this brings us this year from 23 April to 1 June. The Gaelic term *Deasghabhail* means ‘right-taking’ or ‘taking the right hand’ and refers to Christ as depicted in Acts 7: 55, 56. “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”

Whit Sunday, *Di-Dòmhnach Caingis*, 11 June. This is Pentecost or ‘Quinquagesima Sunday’, literally fifty days after Easter, counting the days at both ends as usual. It is the seventh Sunday after Easter. The secular Whitsunday came to be held on 15 May irrespective of the date of the Church festival.

Once again the Gaelic term is much easier to explain than the English one. *Caingis* is simply a Gaelicisation of ‘Quinquagesima’, but scholars are still arguing their heads off about ‘whit’. Chambers’ dictionary blithely says that at Pentecost the converts of the primitive Church wore white robes, but did they? Hutton agrees however that Pentecost was a notable time for baptisms, and that white was the customary custom of baptismal robes. “Medieval writers,” he adds, “made their own guesses; thus the fourteenth-century monk John Mirk suggested that the name came from the giving of wit to the disciples by the Holy Ghost.”

Trinity Sunday, *Di-Dòmhnach Trianaid*, 18 June. This is the Sunday after Whit Sunday. One of the greatest events of the year in Carrick (Ayrshire), which was Gaelic-speaking down to the seventeenth century, was the Kirkdominie Fair at Girvan, held until the nineteenth century at the ruins of the Chapel of Kirkdominie or *Cill Dhòmhnach*, which was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. It settled eventually on the last Saturday of May.

Corpus Christi Thursday, *Diar-Daoin Chuirp Chrìosta*, 22 June. The festival in honour of the Eucharist (Corpus Christi, *Corp Chrìosta*, the Body of Christ). It is held on the Thursday following Trinity Sunday.

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