

## The Month of the Rising Sun

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

YOU are most likely to be reading this on Maundy Thursday (20 April) or Good Friday (21 April), or perhaps on Easter Saturday, Sunday or Monday (22-24 April). So these and their Gaelic and Scots equivalents are the names I will talk about this time.

Maundy Thursday is also called Holy Thursday, Skyre Thursday, *Diar-Daoin Bangaid*, *Diar-Daoin a' Bhrochain* and *Diar-Daoin a' Bhrochain Mhóir*. It's the day that commemorates the Last Supper, and that comes across clearly from the Gaelic names. The idea of celebrating the Last Supper on the day before celebrating the Crucifixion goes back at least to Jerusalem in AD 385 and had reached Britain by the eighth century. It got the name 'Maundy Thursday' in the Middle Ages, but scholars are not quite sure how. Perhaps it was from the *mandatum* or final set of instructions given by Christ to His apostles. Or perhaps it was from 'maunds' or baskets in which gifts were given to the poor.

It is hardly surprising that, as the feast of the Last Supper, Maundy Thursday became strongly associated with the taking of communion, but by the ninth century it was associated with baptism as well. That is because, as scripture tells us, one of Christ's actions at the Last Supper was to wash His disciples' feet as a gesture of humility. In his book 'The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain', Ronald Hutton charts for us the development of this into a royal ritual. 'According to Bede,' he says, 'the monks of Lindisfarne were already performing the action for each other upon this day before the year 700.'

'On the Continent clerics had used the custom almost two centuries earlier than that, and by the year 1000 French kings were washing the feet of paupers to imitate Christ. The first English sovereign to follow their example was John, almost certainly as part of an attempt to demonstrate his piety in the aftermath of his excommunication by the Pope.'

'In the year 1210 an entry occurs among his accounts for the presentation of robes and money on Maundy Thursday to thirteen poor men, representing the first appearance of the gifts which became standard procedure after the monarch had laved the feet of the recipients. The number was that of Christ and the apostles, but later sovereigns chose to benefit more, and there was no standard rule for the "royal Maundy" until 1361, when Edward III marked his fiftieth year by washing the feet of as many individuals as he had years of age.'

'This became the tradition for royalty thereafter. As the Reformation increased the sanctity of monarchy while decreasing that of clerics, the custom survived it with ease. A particularly well-documented "maundy" was that of Elizabeth I at Greenwich palace in 1572. The monarch being aged 39, and female, it was that number of poor women who were honoured. To rescue the monarch from any actual contact with dirt, their feet were cleaned thoroughly beforehand by the yeoman of the laundry, then the sub-almoner, and then the almoner.'

'Elizabeth knelt before them on carpets and cushions in her great hall and washed one foot of each in a silver basin of warm, scented water. She then wiped them and kissed the toes, after which the almoner presented each one with cloth, shoes, claret, fish, bread, an apron, and two bags of money, a white one containing 39 pence, and a red one with 20 shillings. As always, there is no indication of how the lucky recipients were chosen.'

This is the kind of thing that inspired 'Blackadder' on TV. British kings and queens clearly loathed washing other people's feet and happily used gifts as a way of getting out of it. Most of the Stuart kings sprinkled the feet without washing them, Queen Anne left the job completely to her almoner, and in the 1730s under George II the whole pretence of washing was given up for good. 'Today the Queen distributes her own gifts herself,' says Hutton, 'to the appropriate number of elderly people of slender means and respectable character, at Westminster Abbey on the morning of Maundy Thursday.'

'All the beneficiaries,' he adds, 'are from the diocese of Canterbury. If the royal participation has been restored, the presents, like the whole ceremony, are token, being specially minted 1d, 2d, 3d, and 4d pieces delivered in individual bags. What commenced as a clerical gesture of humility, and was subsequently used to enhance the status of the monarchy, is now primarily a means of according pleasure, and pride, to senior citizens.'

Another name for Maundy Thursday is 'Holy Thursday', it being the only Thursday in the year set aside for a religious purpose. The 'colonisation' by religion of specific days of the week other than Sunday was not usual. In a sense there are three religious Mondays (Shrove Monday, Easter Monday, Whit Monday) but only one religious Thursday. The Presbyterian churches developed this principle of course to give us the Thursday Fast Day, Men's Day on Friday, and Communion Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

The Scots name 'Skire Thursday' or 'Skires Thursday' was capable of infinite degrees of corruption. It was a popular fair-day, and according to public records 'Skyre Thursday' was held at Old Aberdeen, 'Sky-Thursday' at Coupar Angus, and 'Skyries Thursday', 'Skeir Thursday' or even 'Scarce Thursday' at Melrose. In Ayrshire fairs were held 'on the Wednesday before Skeirs Friday in April' in both Fenwick and Stewarton, and a 'Skeir Fair' survived in Glasgow till 1890 on the third Friday of April. The term means 'clear, bright', hence 'pure', and seems on the face of it to derive from Old Norse *Skirithorsdagr*, Norwegian *Skirtorsdag*, *skjærtorsdag* ('Holy Thursday'), on which ritual bathing, symbolic of purification, took place.

This ritual bathing clearly derives, like the Maundy tradition, from Christ's washing the feet of His disciples. It can also be connected with the ceremonies that go under the Gaelic names of *Diar-Daoin Bangaid* ('Banquet Thursday'), *Diar-Daoin a' Bhrochain* ('Gruel Thursday', 'Porridge Thursday'), and *Diar-Daoin a' Bhrochain Mhóir* ('Thursday of the Big Gruel/Porridge'). At midnight on the eve of Holy Thursday people

waded out from west-facing shores in the Western Isles to make gifts or sacrifices of porridge or ale to a saint variously called Bannan, Manannan, Mantan or John (*Seónaidh*). Then, safely back on dry land, they feasted and celebrated around a blazing fire until dawn.

There are some peculiar things about this. One is the fusing of two very different figures, the god Manannan mac Lir and the scriptural John the Baptist, presumably because they are associated above all with water and, in John's case, baptism. If Norse Christianity had brought to the Gaels the notion that ritual bathing was the most important thing about Holy Thursday, we can perhaps begin to understand why that happened. Add to this the fact that according to scripture John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ, and we see a little better why he came to be associated with the day before that of Christ's crucifixion. And this despite the fact that he had his own very well established fire-feast at midsummer, *Latha Fhéill Sheathain* on 24 June.

The Gaelic name of Good Friday, *Di-Haoine na Ceusta*, comes from an *Ceusadh*, 'the Crucifixion'. In modern Gaelic we would expect *Di-Haoine a' Cheusaidh* but in earlier times the *-adh* ending of some nouns changed into *-ta* in the genitive case. That would give us *Di-Haoine a' Cheusta* of course but somehow this one seems to have changed its gender to feminine as well — *Di-Haoine na Ceusta*. All very odd.

Hutton points out that at first the Anglo-Saxons called this day 'Long Friday' because of the unusually protracted services. In Germany however it seems that it became known as *Gottes Freytag* ('God's Friday'). This developed into *Gute Freytag* or 'Good Friday'. The naming of 'God's Friday' makes sense according to the same principle as 'Holy Thursday', it being the only Friday in the year set aside for a religious purpose.

Coming now to names for Easter, I pointed out in my last article that Gaelic *Càisg* and Scots *Pasch* both come from Latin *pascha*, Hebrew *pesach*, meaning 'Passover', and that the only mystery is 'Easter' itself. What this brings out is that we know even less about pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religion than we do about pre-Christian Celtic religion. But clearly the Anglo-Saxons had a spring celebration which was important enough to transfer its name to the greatest Christian festival of the year.

We know almost nothing about this except what Bede (St Bede, the Venerable Bede, an English monk who lived from about AD 673 to 735) tells us in his book *De Tempore Ratione* ('The Reckoning of Time'). April, he says, was previously called Eosturmonath by the English, and he explains: 'Eosturmonath has a name which is now translated "Paschal month", and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.'

Scholars nowadays have become pretty sceptical about this. Not about the existence of a lunar month at this time of year called Eosturmonath, Ostarmanoth, Ostermonat or the like, because that is well attested throughout the Germanic-speaking territories, but about Eostre, Ostar or Oster being a goddess. In an appendix to her fascinating book 'An Egg at Easter', Venetia Newall reviews all the evidence, and what it boils down to is that Eostre, Ostar and Oster meant 'dawn' and 'the rising sun' and that from them come both the spacial concept 'east' and the temporal concept 'Easter'. By this argument Eosturmonath means 'the month of the rising sun', or even, as Hutton suggests, 'the month of opening' or 'the month of beginnings'.

Whether the rising sun is visualised as a goddess depends on your point of view. As one scholar remarked, it may all be allegorical. Says Newall by way of analogy: 'Aurora, Latin for Eos, the Greek personification of the dawn, was a purely mythological figure, not a goddess with a cult . . . Homer represents her as rising each morning from the couch of Tithonus, drawn out of the east in a chariot, bringing light to gods and to mankind. He calls her "rosy-fingered" . . . In art Eos is traditionally represented as a young woman, walking rapidly, with a youth in her arms; sometimes she rises from the sea in a chariot drawn by winged horses; sometimes, as the goddess who disperses the dews of the morning, she has a pitcher in each hand.'

Having disposed of the goddess Eostre (well, sort of) maybe I should say something about eggs, bunnies and hot cross buns. Eggs are a genuine symbol of the season whose use (including decorating and rolling them) is so widespread and ancient that Newall's book about them runs to 445 pages (and is beautifully illustrated). Another seasonal symbol, the hare, was, according to Hutton, 'taken by German immigrants to the USA and given tremendous popularity there as the Easter Bunny before being re-exported to Britain'.

Hutton goes on to point out that in the nineteenth century folklorists in England and Wales discovered a superstition that bread, buns, or biscuits baked on Good Friday had special powers. 'They were generally believed never to go mouldy and to be capable of curing diseases, especially intestinal disorders . . . Like a pre-Reformation host they had to be marked with the sign of the cross.'

In Scotland, he concludes, this chimed with beliefs 'that eggs laid and butter made on Good Friday were regarded as being exceptionally beneficial. Long after their associations with divine or supernatural power have faded everywhere, the round currant buns with their white cross remain distinctive products of bakers and confectioners across Britain, a last echo of one of the most dramatic rituals of medieval Christianity.'

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