

July — and it's time for Colin's Fair

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

JULY, the last month of summer, has been variously called in Gaelic *Seachd-Mhios* 'Seven-Month', *am Mios Buidhe* 'the Yellow Month', and *Iùl* and *Iùil*, derived like 'July' itself from the Latin calendar month *Iulius*, named after Julius Caesar. By common consensus it is now formally *an t-Iuchar*, an ancient name for the 'Bordertime' between July and August. In the early nineteenth century James Macintyre from Balquhiddier in Perthshire described it like this: "*Mios ma dheire 'n t-Samhrai, no Mios na Feill Seirbh*. Last month of Summer, or St Serf's. The last fortnight of this month and first fortnight of the ensuing August, Old Style, or the last fortnight of Summer and first of Autumn, was anciently *Mios an Iuchar* (the month of *Iuchar*)."

He went on: "It was also called *Mios nan cnuimheag* (worm month) *no Mios nan cnoimheag 's nan cuileag*, as abounding so much in insects and putrefaction. It was reckoned the season most favourable for the recovery of invalids, as the middle of spring (March) and latter end of autumn (*tiom thuiteam na duillich*, the fall of the leaf) were reckoned most trying and destructive for the same. This at least, as every body knows, is confessedly the hottest part of the year, embracing, I believe, what are called in English the dog-days, probably because at this season the dogs are most liable to madness.

"This month of *Iuchar* extended to about the 26th of August, New Style. They said in old time of this season,

'Se 'n iùchar gaoth'or
Ni 'n stuth cath'or.

Which may be rendered, though not very correctly,

The windy August (Iuchar, rather)
Makes the corn chaffy."

Macintyre's *Mios ma dheire 'n t-Samhrai* is of course *Mios mu Dheireadh an t-Samhraidh*, 'the Last Month of Summer', while St Serf's Day is 1 July. His *mios nan cnuimheag* ('the month of the worms') and *mios nan cnoimheag 's nan cuileag* ('the month of the worms and of the flies') provide vital evidence to explain the term 'worm month' used by an eighteenth-century Lowland Perthshire writer, John Ramsay of Ochertyre. Ramsay defines the worm month, 'to which the Highlanders look so much', variously as July and as the period 26 July – 26 August New Style, that is 15 July to 15 August Old Style. This makes it correspond exactly to the *iuchar* in its modern and traditional senses respectively.

Clearly Dwelly's definition 'warm month' for *Iuchar* is a misunderstanding, though a highly forgivable one. Macintyre's explanation of the term 'dog-days' is off the mark — the dog-days are in fact the time when the dog-star Sirius rises and sets with the sun, about 3 July to 11 August. As for his saying *Se 'n t-iuchar gaothmhor nì 'n stuth càthmhor*, 'it's the windy bordertime that makes the chaffy stuff', it's usually expressed as: *Se am foghar gaothmhor a nì an coirce càthmhor*. 'It's the windy harvest that makes the chaffy oats.' So we see *iuchar* sometimes referring to high summer, and sometimes to autumn, as is appropriate for a term that originally signified a period lying two (or, in some accounts, three) weeks on either side of the autumn quarterday.

I notice that Edward Dwelly's informant Donald Murray (Aberdeen and Lewis) gave him a traditional variant of *iuchar* — *ùthar*, defined as: "Period of six weeks — the last three of July and the first three of August. It commences on a Friday and ends on a Tuesday." How Murray could be so specific about the day of the week is beyond me. Maybe there is a reader who can help.

Now for a traditional event that took place around this time of year, Dingwall's old July fair called Colin's Fair or the *Féill Chailein*. Let me go back to the beginning on this one.

Traditional fairs were usually named after a saint, like St Serf. There were various reasons for this but in practical terms a fair had to have a focus, which was usually a cross — a market cross — and this cross had to symbolise the protection offered by the keepers of the fair and the sanctity of the bargains reached there. A bargain was normally sealed by touching the cross, and in superstitious times that was a lot more effective than a signature on a piece of paper would be nowadays. So the saint provided the fair with a name, a history, a day, a cross, and a measure of protection and of honesty.

The Reformation of 1560 cut across that, and during the course of the seventeenth century various landlords took advantage of the new climate to establish fairs named after members of their own families. If that gave them increased stature, a kind of sanctity even, in the eyes of the people, well and good. Even if it didn't, it could be a neat little birthday gift to your wife or daughter.

That, then, seems to be why in 1693 Sir Alexander Mackenzie of Coul in Easter Ross got an Act of Parliament authorising him to change a free fair belonging to him at the church of Contin from the first to the third Wednesday of October and to call it Janet Fair. At the same time he got permission to change another free fair from the first to the third Wednesday of January and call it St John's Fair. So we begin to suspect that Janet and John were relatives of his own.

Of course it is possible that he may have had in mind St John the Almsgiver, the patron of the 'Knights of Malta', whose feast-day was 23 January, but that is very doubtful, and in fact the name was to sink without trace — in 1837 when the town council of Dingwall, seven miles east, resolved that these fairs be held thenceforth in the burgh, they referred to St John's merely as the New Year Market.

Janet Fair, or the *Féill Seònaid* as it was by then generally known, was fixed at the first Wednesday of June, a huge leap through the calendar which was unthinkable for a saint's day. And by 1837 there were also a Colin's

Fair and a Martha's Fair, the latter held on the first Wednesday of November.

In his book 'The Romance of a Royal Burgh: Dingwall's Story of a Thousand Years', Norman Macrae confirms that Janet's and Colin's Fairs both embodied Coul family names, and it turns out that the list of Sir Alexander's children is highly suggestive. Alexander Mackenzie's history of the MacKenzies tells us that by his first wife (Jean, daughter of Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstown) Sir Alexander had John, his heir, 3rd Mackenzie of Coul; Colin, who succeeded John as 4th Mackenzie of Coul; an unnamed daughter who married Mackintosh of Cullachy; and Janet, who married Alexander Mackenzie of Davochmaluag in 1695. So it's highly likely that the fair in Dingwall on the first Wednesday of November supplies us with the missing name of that daughter who married Mackintosh of Cullachy — Martha.

Colin's Fair, the *Féill Chailein*, presents us with a tangle of sacred and secular nomenclature which seems impossible to resolve. When the town council transferred it to Dingwall in 1837 they fixed its date on the first Tuesday of July. Subsequent accounts refer to it variously as *an Fhéill Chailein* and *an Fhéill Choluim*, placing it at the first Tuesday of July, the last Tuesday but one of July, or the second Tuesday of August.

With this we can compare a charter of 1684 in favour of George, Duke of Gordon, which authorised a free yearly fair at Gordon's Burgh, formerly the Burgh of Barony of Inverlochry, for three days, on 9 July, called St Colin's or Colm's fair. The apparent free variation between Colin and Colm, Gaelic *Cailean* and *Calum*, needn't surprise us — on the analogy of *Moirean*, *Maol Moire*, *Gille Moire* (names derived from *Moire*, the Virgin Mary), *Peidirean*, *Maol Pheadair*, *Gille Pheadair* (names derived from *Peadar*, St Peter), and so on, *Cailean* would certainly have been seen as related to *Maol Caluim* and *Gille Caluim*. Highland families which used Colin (the MacKenzies and Campbells for example) tended not to use Malcolm, and *vice versa*. What is puzzling is the firm adherence, both at Contin and at Inverlochry, to a fair-day one full month later than the very well-known feast-day of Columba, 9 June.

In his 'Celtic Place-Names of Scotland' Professor Watson suggested tentatively that the dedication was an ancient one to Mo-Cholmóg, whose feast-day was 19 July. I don't think that's right. My guess is that Sir Alexander initiated the trend in 1681 by establishing a fair at Contin on the first Tuesday of July in honour of his second son Colin. (It was in 1681, says Alexander Mackenzie the historian, that Sir Alexander obtained a charter under the Great Seal 'by which his lands of Coul and others were, upon his own resignation, erected into one free barony in favour of himself and heirs male, holding of the Crown'.) I believe that it was referred to indifferently in Gaelic from the beginning as the *Féill Chailein* or the *Féill Chaluim*; that it was economically successful; that its name was misunderstood by many outside Ross-shire as being in honour of St Columba; and that the Duke of Gordon sought to emulate its success in his proposed new burgh in Lochaber by fixing his own new fair there at the same time of year but with the kind of overt links to the saint that befitted both the more westerly location and his own Episcopalian beliefs.

The Duke's charter of 1684 also authorised for 'Gordon's Burgh' a free yearly fair for three days on 2 September to be called St Giles' fair, and St Giles' day is indeed 1 September. Here, then, were two loyal Episcopalian dedications in an Episcopalian era, and if I am right, the fixing of St Colin's or Colm's fair at 9 July rather than 9 June is the Duke's acknowledgement of Sir Alexander Mackenzie's pioneering work in establishing new Highland markets.

Colin MacDonald, Gaelic-speaking member of the Land Court in the 1940s, had vivid recollections from his boyhood in the 1890s of *Féill Chailein* in its declining years. For the boys of his glen Colin's Fair and the Strathpeffer Games were the most exciting days of the year. He told in his book 'Echoes of the Glen' of how they would find the High Street 'lined with stalls on which would be heaped such an assortment of toys and "goodies" as we would only see at *Feill Chailein* and in our dreams'. This is what he says he bought there for eightpence:

A pistol — 1d.

A box of caps — a halfpenny

A watch — 2d.

3 sugary biscuits — 1d.

1 lump of the famous candy rock — a halfpenny

2 minutes on a swing — 2d.

A fourth-share in a bottle of lemonade — 1d.

— and a day of cloudless pleasure that only a boy can buy!

Any reader who would like to know more about James Macintyre or our old Scottish fairs can look at my articles 'James Macintyre's Calendar' in volume 17 of 'Scottish Gaelic Studies' (Dept of Celtic, University of Aberdeen, 1996) or 'Scottish Fairs and Fair-Names' in volume 33 of 'Scottish Studies' (School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2000 — just out).

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