

## Dressing up at Christmas

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

SOME people seem to think there was no such thing as Christmas in the Highlands and Islands until recently. Not true. If you peer into the past, it's there all right. In fact, it seems pretty similar to Christmas nowadays. People ate a lot and gave presents and had parties and dressed up and played games. But Christmas Past can be a bit hard to find, because after the Reformation it was officially abolished and one result was that its customs tended to merge with the New Year.

*Oidhche nam Bannag*, Christmas Eve, is a case in point. *Bannag* is a gift in the form of a bannock made in the palm of the hand (the word 'bannock' is derived from it). The customs of *Oidhche nam Bannag* coalesced with those of new Year's Eve, and might be performed on any night from Christmas Eve to Hogmanay. However, in volume 1 of 'Carmina Gadelica' Alexander Carmichael preserved for us the elements of *Oidhche nam Bannag* that seem to belong particularly to Christmas.

On Christmas Eve, he says, bands of young men went from house to house chanting carols (of which he gives examples). They were called *guiseran* (the English word 'guisers'), or *fir-duan* (song-men), or *gillean Nollaig* (Christmas lads), or a word which he spells *nuallairean*. It means literally 'yellers', on the face of it, but surely what it really represents is 'noëllers'!

The *nuallairean* wore an early version of a Santa Claus outfit — long white shirts for surplices and tall white hats for mitres. And they carried around the skin of a white male lamb without spot or blemish. On entering a house, they put a child — a real one, or an improvised doll — on the skin and carried it three times sunwise round the fire, singing. Then they got their *bannagan*, with butter, crowdie and so on.

Clearly guising was popular all over the Highlands at Christmas, but the lads didn't stick to dressing up as Santa. At Elgin in 1598 a young man accused by the kirk session of guising and dancing at Yule admitted to wearing his sister's coat, while his friends had clothes 'dammaskit' about them and their faces blackened, and one of them played on bones and bells. For the crime of celebrating Christmas they were sentenced stand barefoot and bare-legged in the church for two Sundays in a row. Similarly in 1600 women were punished at Elgin for guising in men's clothes, dancing and singing carols.

At Golspie in the nineteenth century the girls went guising with white gowns over their clothes, decorated with bright ribbons, wearing their grandmothers' caps and masks of black muslin cut in the shape of the face. The boys wore long overcoats, big hats pulled down to hide their faces, and sometimes false faces and long white beards. They made the round of the houses singing comic songs and dancing, and if they were lucky they were given a penny.

This is all a great mixture of tradition. Put together, the sacrificial lamb and the guising or mummering (now associated with Hallowe'en but once popular all over the Highlands at Christmas) are basically a New-Year expulsion-of-evil ritual, I think, with some kind of a St Nicholas or Santa Claus element imposed on top of it.

It may be that the bishop's surplice and mitre were customary during Carmichael's childhood in Lismore, which was partly Episcopalian and had very strong connections with the medieval Church. They were not an element of Christmas ritual further west. They do, however, appear to have been known on the east coast. In 1926 Alexander Polson published a little book called 'Our Highland Folklore Heritage'. Polson may have been a Ross-shire man, I am not quite sure, but in any event he was a schoolmaster and he makes it quite clear in his introduction that most of the information in his book was got by his pupils from the old people in various districts in which he taught — which he describes as 'Inverness, Easter and Wester Ross, Lewis, Sutherland, and Caithness'.

Bearing in mind that geographical area, and the tendency which I have mentioned for Christmas traditions to become hopelessly mixed up with New Year ones, let us now look at the description, in Polson's chapter 'Yuletide', of a traditional Highland New Year's Eve.

"For Hogmanay," he says, "the youngsters prepared tall cone-shaped hats made of willow wands, which they decorated with long strips of coloured paper, if that were procurable; if not, then with a newspaper cut into stripes. They next donned, surplice fashion, a white shirt, and had this bound round the waist by a rope. They formed themselves into bands of three, and one of them carried a bag to contain the gifts of meal, when that was offered, as it often was, in place of a copper or two. They visited the houses of all the neighbours, and on entering they sang:

*Here comes the guisers,  
Never here before,  
Not to beg nor to borrow,  
But to drive away the sorrow  
From your door.  
Up stocks, down stools,  
And don't you think  
That we are fools.*

Two of them then began to dance to the singing of the youth representing the wife who carried the bag. After the dance they all sang:

*Get up goodwife  
and shake your feathers,  
And do not think  
that we are beggars,  
For we are bairns*

*come out to play;  
Get up and gies  
our Hogmanay.*

The goodwife who did not drop at least a saucerful of oatmeal into the bag was a very notable exception to the general hospitality extended to these guisers, who usually had at the end of their circuit two or three shillings and a stone or two of meal to divide between them.”

The rhymes Polson quotes are clearly not translations, and this helps us locate the source of Carmichael’s ‘mitre and surplice’ tradition as the English-speaking eastern fringe of the old north Highlands. In fact there are some crucial differences. The tall white hats have turned out not to be bishop’s mitres at all but dunce’s caps (“and don’t you think that we are fools”). The surplices are more like the simple garments of monks or other mendicants (“and do not think that we are beggars”).

All in all, then, there is no particular connection with Christmas. These were mummers belonging to a common European tradition of masquerading at New Year, a tradition which was exported to the New World (and whose mode of dress was taken up by the Ku Klux Klan, I’m afraid). I suspect we may have a case here of Carmichael finding the dignity of religion in a ritual which had more to do with its converse, the forces of chaos. And for confirmation of the nature of *Oidhche nam Bannag* we can turn to an early nineteenth-century commentator, James Macintyre from Balquhider. He calls it *Latha nam Bonnag Nollaig*, ‘the Day of the Christmas Bannocks’. He says: “*Latha nam bonnag nollaig* is the day previous to Christmas, wherein, agreeable to ancient custom, the youth make a point of going about to their neighbours’ houses, and demanding their christmas (or alms), as a regular tribute, saying, *Mo bhonnag oirbh*, ‘Give me my Christmas.’

He goes on: “They call this *Bonnag*, no [or] *Ceapair*; and consists of a whole cake of barley, or bannock, (whence probably it has derived the name,) folded double, and in the heart of it butter perhaps, and a large slice of cheese. This is probably a relick of the begging friars.”

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