

## The Twelve Days of Christmas

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I'VE got up early on Christmas morning to write this. It's quiet. The girls have grown up and our Christmas mornings are no longer filled with sounds like tearing paper, shrieks of delight and throbbing pop-music. And after a December of almost non-stop rain it's decided to be a white Christmas when we were least expecting it. The sun is shining, the sky is pale blue, and all the hills and trees and roofs are covered in snow.

A white Christmas has always been best. *Si 'n Nollaig dhubh a dh'fhàgas an cladh miath*. "It's the black Christmas that leaves the churchyard fat." *S blianach Nollaig gun sneachd*. "Barren is Christmas without snow." These are common sayings, and they were echoed and clarified by James Macintyre from Balquhider in Perthshire, writing between the years 1808 and 1835. His version was: *Se 'n Nullaig blionar* (or *blianach*) *nì 'n cladh tarbhach*, which he interprets like this: "The dry or barren Christmas makes fruitful the church-yard; that is, the following season shall be unusually mortal."

The importance of a white Christmas can best be understood in the context of a tradition that the weather of the twelve days starting *Nollaig Mhór* ('Big Christmas') represent the weather of the next twelve months in microcosm. If snow arrives on Christmas Day, January will be white, and that's fine. If it waits till later in the week (say the 28th or 29th, when you are likely to be reading this), it means a snowy April or May, which will put the harvest under serious threat. The governing principle is: *Is math gach aimsir 'na h-àm fhéin*. "Good is all weather in its own time."

For the same sort of reason, the whole week following Christmas Day was devoted to feasting and almsgiving (bannocks, usually). Macintyre described the tradition like this: "The last week of the old year, called *Seacain na Nullaig* or Christmas week, and the first week of the new year, called *Seacain na co'ill*, besides being all a period of holy days as is still, I believe, generally the case in all christian countries, were particularly noticed in a civil or chronic sense (so to speak) by our ancestors: for, from the first 12 days after Christmas they shrewdly prognosticated the weather, and other characteristics, of the ensuing 12 months of the year, that is, a day for a month. Thus from the characteristic features of the 1st of these days they prognosticated the most probable weather of January; and from the 2nd day the weather characteristic of February; and so of the rest."

Macintyre's *Seacain na Nullaig* is properly *Seachdain na Nollaig*, and his *Seacain na co'ill* is properly *Seachdain na Coilne* or *na Coille* ('Calendar Week', 'New Year's Week'). The trouble with this tradition is that, at least after 1752 when the Gregorian calendar was brought in, it became uncertain as to exactly which days were meant. So for example, when the Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant encountered the custom on one of his journeys to the Highlands and Islands in the 1770s, he expressed it like this: "The Highlanders form a sort of almanack or presage of the weather of the ensuing year in the following manner: they make observation on twelve days, beginning at the last of December, and hold as an infallible rule, that whatsoever weather happens on each of those days, the same will prove to agree to the corresponding months. Thus, January is to answer to the weather of December 31st, February to that of January 1st, and so on with the rest. Old people still pay great attention to this augury."

By this token, then, *Nollaig Mhór* is being understood as the last day of the year – or possibly midnight on the last day of the year, which I suspect is more likely. So snow on Hogmanay is good, because that means a snowy January, and it's snow on the 4th or 5th of January that we should worry about, because that's what signifies the snow in April or May which will put the harvest under threat.

As if this wasn't confusing enough, in some places these twelve days of Christmas started being reckoned as the twelve days following Handseil Monday, that is, the first Monday after New Year's Day. New Year's Day 2001 is itself a Monday, so Handseil Monday is January 8th; snow on January 8th will mean a snowy January, and it's snow on January 11th or 12th that will endanger the harvest.

If you think all this is a bit daft, consider modern science. Which theory do you prefer about global warming? Or about salmonella in eggs? Or about BSE? Each one cancels out the others. The important thing was not for there to be one single theory of weather causation (which would in fact be daft), but for there to be a number of competing theories so that arguing about them might bring about a little light as well as heat. No doubt a given theory would prevail in a given location (possibly because it seemed to fit its microclimate), and in the days in which information was spread not by radio or newspapers but by the visiting stranger, the news and views of such a stranger were eagerly listened to and debated. Remember the first rule of the ceilidh-house: *A' chiad sgeul air fear an taighe, sgeul gu latha air an aoigh*. "The first tale (or story, or news) from the man of the house, a tale (or story, or news) until dawn from the guest."

The reason why the twelve days of Christmas were believed to govern the weather of the following year is that they were an inbetween-time (between years) and so belonged to a sacred otherworld where time did not exist – where everything that is going to happen has happened already. It's another way of saying that nature operates according to a set of pre-ordained rules and patterns, and that of course is true. The closer you are to the fundamental crack in time, the more effective the prognosis. And the most fundamental crack of all is the gap between years – the stroke of midnight on *Oidhche Challainn*, Hogmanay.

It was believed that the wind *a dh'fhàgas a' Challainn* ('which the New Year leaves', i.e. which prevails at midnight on New Year's Eve) will prevail throughout the year, and thus determine the fertility of land and sea over the coming twelve months. *Gaoth na Callainn, gaoth na bliadhna*: 'the wind of New Year's Day, the wind of the year.'

*Gaoth a-tuath,  
fuachd is feannadh.  
Gaoth an-iar,  
uisg' is feamainn.  
Gaoth a-deas,  
teas is toradh.  
Gaoth an-ear  
a dh'fhearaihb a' chuain.*

("North wind, / cold and flaying. / West wind, / rain and seaweed. / South wind, / heat and plenty. / East wind / for the men of the sea.") That, at any rate, is the version from South Uist, where the main fishing banks lie to the west. It's a common rhyme, however, and has many variations, like this:

*Gaoth a-tuath,  
fuachd is gailleann.  
Gaoth an-iar,  
iasg is bainne.  
Gaoth a-deas,  
teas is toradh.  
Gaoth an-ear,  
meas air chrannaibh.*

(“North wind, / cold and storm. / West wind, / fish and milk. / South wind, / heat and plenty. / East wind, / fruit on branches.”) The description of the south wind as bringing *teas is toradh* is totally consistent in all versions, I think, while the description of what the east wind brings is the least consistent: sometimes it is *mil air chrannaibh* (‘honey on branches’), sometimes it is *tart is crannadh* ‘drought and parching’.

Referring to this tradition, the Rev. John Macrury from Benbecula told the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1890: “I do not take it upon myself to say whether this idea is true or not, but it is remarkable that it is from the south that the wind was blowing last year and this year when the new year came in, and that the wind was more often southerly this year and last in the Highlands and Islands than any living person can remember . . . There was plenty of *teas is toradh* in the Highlands last year, but we cannot say the same for this year.”

I will leave it to you to go out at midnight on *Oidhche Challainn* and make your own prognosis of the year’s wind and weather. Let me just finish by pointing to a saying given in Nicolson’s ‘Gaelic Proverbs’. *Nollaig an-diugh, ’s Bealltainn a-màireach* (‘Christmas today, and Beltane tomorrow’) seems at first sight like an expression of how quickly springtime passes, but Nicolson points out that it’s “an ingenious calculation, showing e.g. that if Christmas Day falls on Monday, May-day will be Tuesday. It is generally, but not absolutely, correct.”

Well, Christmas day fell on a Monday this year, and 1 May 2001 is going to be a Tuesday, just as Nicolson says. Some prognostications are easy. *Bliadhna Mhath Ùr dhuibh uile.*

**29 December 2000**