

My little quern-dust Valentine

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

FROM as early as 1362 the name Valentine, in the form *Uailein* or *Ualain* (sometimes anglicised as Wiland), was in very common use among the Chisholms of Strathglass, who were of Norman origin. St Valentine's is next Wednesday – or Thursday. *Latha Fhéill Uailein* may have settled down nowadays as 14 February, but the 15th is the day given for it by nineteenth-century sources such as Henry Whyte (Fionn) and the 'Gaelic Almanack' for 1873. St Valentine's fair at Methlick in Aberdeenshire is recorded for 1681 on the second Tuesday in February, and there also used to be fairs every 15 February at Linlithgow, Forfar, and the Cults of Leny near Callander.

In 1681 the Duke of Atholl got an Act of Parliament granting him authority for a 'Lady Fair' on 15 February at Moulin near Pitlochry. It appears to be an alternative name for *Féill Mo-Chalmaig*, St Colm's or Colman's market, which is the old name for the February fair at Moulin, a very ancient fair indeed, held around a standing stone. George Smith, in his 'Exact Dealer's Companion' of 1727, refers under February to 'Valentines Day being still the 14. at Moulin in Athole'. One historian has described Lady Day at Moulin as a fair designed to celebrate Candlemas (the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, 2 February), but Candlemas was never known as Lady Day, and in any case it's thirteen days adrift from Candlemas at a time long before the Calendar Act of 1751 made such confusion commonplace.

I can only pull these strands together by suggesting that 'Lady Fair' is Atholl's parliamentary name for the *Féill Mo-Chalmaig*, devised as a Valentine's Day gift to his wife. In terms of fairs, this would not have been quite as strange as it sounds. In the late seventeenth century, with the growth of trade in general and the cattle trade in particular, the creation of new fairs and the renaming of old ones was quite a hobby among Scottish landlords; freed by the Reformation from the need to show respect to the saints, they showed respect to themselves instead. In 1693, for example, Parliament authorised Sir Ludovick (Louis) Grant to hold a free fair to be called Louis Fair after himself, to be held at the church of Kilmore in Urquhart on Loch Ness-side on the last Tuesday of August in each year, and another, to be called Lady Fair in honour of his wife, to be held yearly in November at the same place.

The question is, how likely was this in terms of Valentine's Day? Would a Highland aristocrat in 1681 have celebrated the day at all? If so, would he have celebrated it like this? Is St Valentine's Day not for star-struck young lovers? Wouldn't he have given a present to his sweetheart or his mistress and ignored his wife?

To answer these questions, let me start at the beginning. Valentine was a very obscure Roman martyr. The idea that he is the patron saint of lovers seems to originate in the fact that his day is in mid-February when the birds of the sky can be seen pairing off. Two fourteenth-century English writers, Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower, mention a popular belief that 'the birds choose their mates on St Valentine's Day'.

By about 14 February the mating flights of ravens, crows and rooks should usually be visible, and they start repairing their nests. The further south you go the more true this is. St Valentine's Day is certainly a custom that has come to us from the south. And in a good year in England the spring songs of thrushes, finches and woodpeckers are starting to be heard as well.

There used to be two distinct Valentine's Day practices. One was about prognosticating who you were going to marry, the other was about gifts. Both are of a type strongly associated in the Highlands and Islands with the quarterdays and New Year (times of new beginnings), so whatever occurs in the Highlands is likely to be an import from the south, linking up perhaps with traditions of St Brigid's Day (*Latha Fhéill Brighde*), which the Calendar Act of 1751 effectively pushed back from 1 to 12 February, bringing it very close to St Valentine's. (In fact, since 1900 St Brigid's Day Old Style has technically been 14 February itself.)

Obviously gift-giving is the practice that concerns us in the curious matter of the Duke of Atholl, but let's look at prognostication first. It was referred to as early as the fifteenth century, when John Lydgate spoke of how Englishmen liked 'To look and search Cupid's calendar / And choose their choice, by great affection'. There were two ways to find true love on Valentine's Day. One was by drawing lots, the other was by means of what in Gaelic Scotland would be called a *frith* or divination, similar to first-footing – the first person of the opposite sex you saw on the morning of Valentine's Day was the one you would marry.

The 'drawing lots' custom was described as practised in Banffshire by the Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant in his 'A Tour of Scotland in 1769'. He wrote: "Some superstitions still lurk even in this cultivated country . . . The young people determine the figure and size of their husbands by drawing cabbages blindfold on All-Hallows even; and like the English fling nuts into the fire; and in February draw Valentines, and from them collect their future fortune in the nuptial state."

What this actually involved is described in Misson's 'Travels in England'. Says Misson: "On the Eve of the 14th of February, St Valentine's Day, a time when all living Nature inclines to couple, the young folks in England and Scotland too, by a very ancient custom, celebrate a little Festival that tends to the same end. An equal number of Maids and Bachelors get together, each writes their true or some feigned name upon separate billets, which they roll up, and draw by way of lots, the Maids taking the Men's billets, and the Men the Maids'; so that each of the young Men lights upon a Girl that he calls his Valentine, and each of the Girls upon a young man which she calls hers.

"By this means each has two Valentines: but the Man sticks faster to the Valentine that is fallen to him, than to the Valentine to whom he is fallen.

"Fortune having thus divided the company into so many couples, the Valentines give balls and treats to their mistresses, wear their billets several days upon their bosoms or sleeves, and this little sport often ends in

love. This ceremony is practised differently in different Counties, and according to the freedom or severity of Madam Valentine. There is another kind of Valentine, which is the first young Man or Woman that chance throws in your way in the street, or elsewhere, on that day.”

Which brings us to the *frith* type. I don’t have a Scottish account of it, but the English poet and playwright John Gay (1685–1732) offers this description from the young woman’s point of view.

*Last Valentine, the day when birds of kind
Their paramours with mutual chirpings find,
I early rose, just at the break of day,
Before the sun had chas’d the stars away:
A-field I went, amid the morning dew,
To milk my kine (for so should house-wives do).
Thee first I spied, and the first swain we see,
In spite of Fortune, shall our true love be.*

That’s the custom in its primitive form. However, there are few women, perhaps even fewer men, who would want to leave matters entirely to chance. There are lots of instances of the meeting being carefully contrived, for example by walking blindfolded to the home of the chosen person. Other young women who preferred to keep control of their lives would just stay in bed until noon, when it would be safe again to venture out. And if it was just a bit of innocent fun or an educational game for a child, all the arrangements were made the night before anyway. A Dutch visitor to London in 1663 found that, the encounter having taken place as planned, “he asks her name which he takes down and carries on a long strip of paper in his hat band, and in the same way the woman or girl wears his name on her bodice . . . They send each other gloves, silk stockings, or sometimes a miniature portrait, which the ladies wear to foster the friendship.”

Samuel Pepys’s diary shows the game in action. He would call at the house of a work colleague early on the morning of 14 February to pay him the compliment of Valentining his daughter. And he would arrange for a handsome young man to do the same for his own wife, sometimes paying for the gifts involved. One year when he was short of money no young man called at all, and Mrs Pepys was upset. Sometimes women friends would call upon *him*, and sometimes he and Mrs Pepys would draw lots the night before to decide whom they would both visit in the morning.

Eventually they got it down to a regular routine – his cousin would call every year to compliment Mrs Pepys and give her a present, such as a ring, which Samuel already knew she wanted. On 16 February 1667 he told his diary: “To Mrs Pierce’s, where I took up my wife and there find that Mrs Pierce’s little girl is my Valentine, she having drawn me – which I was not sorry for, it easing me of something more that I must have given to others.”

Which brings us to presents. In ‘The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain’ Ronald Hutton describes how a Warwickshire gentleman called Sir Henry Willoughby paid 2s 3d for his Valentine in 1523. “That purchased by Sir Henry must have been more than a mere trifle, and it is a pity that we shall never know what it was, and that indeed no other medieval or Tudor Valentine was ever described.”

It’s good, then, to discover that there was every likelihood that a Duke of Atholl who lived well within the lifetime of Samuel Pepys (who lived from 1633 to 1703) was very likely to give his wife a Valentine present, and that such a present might be substantial. But what do you give a lady who has everything? Naming a fair after her sounds like a brilliant idea. But, for me, discovering that the people ignored his ‘Lady Fair’ and kept calling it *Féill Mo Chalmaig* sounds better still.

Now a little P.S. to my quern-dust Valentine. According to Hutton, it was about 1750 that people started sending written compliments on Valentine’s Day. “By 1825 the London Post Office was handling 200,000 more letters on 14 February than on any other date.” (So much for Christmas.) Lace, satin and fixed messages were added in the 1840s. “In 1880,” says Hutton, “one and a half million Valentine cards passed through the Post Office.”

Then a funny thing happened. In the 1890s, around the same time the naughty seaside postcard was invented, the custom went vulgar. Hutton tells of Valentine cards about 1900 which would spring open to reveal a long paper snake and the message ‘You are a snake in the grass’ or a black man with an ugly face and a long tongue sticking out.

That and the war in the trenches did away with Valentine cards, but in the 50s – thanks to commercial promotion, mass media and American fashion – sentimental ones came back. Dear readers, I will love you always, keep buying the paper, signed, your hunky calendar guy, RMD.

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