

Pity the Shrovetide cock

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

NEXT Tuesday, 27 February, is *Di-Màirt Inid*, Shrove Tuesday ('Pancake Tuesday'). The date of Shrovetide is determined by the date of Easter, which precedes it by seven weeks. Depending on the calculation of Easter in any given year, Shrove Tuesday can fall at any time between 7 February and 7 March.

*Seachd seachdainean gu bràth
Eadar Càisg agus Inid.*

("Seven weeks forever / Between Easter and Shrovetide.") *Inid* is from Latin *initium* ('beginning'), because Shrove Tuesday is the last festival before the beginning of Lent with all its austerities. In the Highlands and Islands food used to be in short supply at this time of year in any case.

*Dèan bonnach mór mu Inid
'S fear eile mu Chàisg,
'S cho fad 's a bhios rud agad
Cha bhì thu falamh gu bràth.*

("Make a big bannock at Shrovetide / And another about Easter, / And as long as you have a bit / You'll never be empty.") Another saying goes:

*Thig an oidhche roimhn latha
A h-uile latha ach Latha Inid.*

("The night comes before the day / Every day except Shrove Day.") Every other holy day is preceded by a fast, just as, scripturally, night precedes day – the night before *Latha Callainn* (New Year's Day) is *Oidhche Challainn*, the night before *Latha Fhéill Brìghde* (St Brigid's, 1 February) is *Oidhch' Fhéill Brìghde*, the night before *Latha Samhna* (All Hallows) is *Oidhche Shamhna* (Hallowe'en), and so on. But *Oidhch' Inid* follows *Latha Inid*.

*Oidhch' Inid
Bidh feòil againn
'S bu chòir dhuinn sin,
Bu chòir dhuinn sin.
Lethcheann circe
'S dà ghreim eòrna
'S bu leòr dhuinn sin,
Bu leòr dhuinn sin.*

("On Ash Eve / We'll have meat / And so we should, / So we should. / Half a chicken / And two bites of barley cake / And that would do us, / That would do us.")

*Bidh bìnn againn,
Bidh beòir againn,
Bidh fìon againn,
Bidh ròic againn,
Meilc is marram,
Mil is bainne,
Seile fallain,
Meall dheth sin,
Meall dheth sin.*

("We'll have rennet, / We'll have beer, / We'll have wine, / We'll have a feast, / Buttermilk and dairy produce, / Honey and milk, / A healthy yield, / Plenty of that, / Plenty of that.") Fasting began at midnight when the amusements were over, and this may perhaps be why the festival was called *an Inid bheadaidh* – 'cheeky, pushy, forward' Shrovetide. Another reason could be the unusual degree of violence attached to many Shrovetide customs. This rhyme claims that if the weather is fine at *Inid* it will be bad at Easter, and vice versa:

*Thuirt an Inid ris a' Chàisg,
'Càit am faigh mi àite cluich?
Thoir thusa dhòmhsa pàilliun geamhraidh
'S togaidh mi taigh samhraidh dhut.'*

("Shrovetide said to Easter, / 'Where will I get a place to play? / You give me a winter pavilion / And I'll

build you a summer house.”) The reference to ‘a place to play’ is no accident. Apart from the saining (*seunadh*) or ritual blessing of cattle, everything that happened on Shrove Tuesday seems to have been a game of one kind or another. *Bonnaich* or pancakes were baked. Divination was practised by burning nuts or putting symbolic objects like rings into brose and cakes. Ball games were played. And cockfighting went on – especially among schoolboys, the schoolmaster taking his salary out of the money that changed hands.

I described this cockfighting custom at this time last year, pointing out that it was introduced to the Highlands around 1700 by the educational system. I also showed that, in line with the natural rhythms of the Gaelic calendar and the abolition by Presbyterians of church festivals connected to Easter, it had become attracted to the spring quarterday (St Brigid’s, 1 February) and Candlemas (2 February). However, the following piece of verse by Duncan Ban Macintyre (1724–1812), in honour of a cock that had accidentally been shot, shows that in his native Glenorchy the annual cockfight was still being held on Shrove Tuesday.

*B’e sin an coileach bòidheach:
Bha cuid air fiamh an òir dheth,
Cuid eile mar na ròsan,
'S bha mòran deth mar an sneachda;
Bu leathann a chrògan,
B’e 'n smògairneach e air faithche;
Bu ro-mhath na bòtan
An ròmaich a bh' air a chasan;
Bha spuir air a spògan
Bha còrr a dh'ionnsaigh a' ghleacaidh
Nuair a thigeadh Di-Màirt
A bhiodh càch a' feuchainn an gaisge.*

(“He was, indeed, a handsome cock: / One part of him showed golden sheen, / Another was like roses, / And he was largely snow-white; / His claws were of wide span, / On the field he was a stocky fellow; / Most excellent long boots / Were the downy tufts upon his legs; / On his feet were talons / Which were unrivalled for the fray / When it came to the Tuesday / On which all tested their valour.”)

Another cruel Shrove Tuesday game, once common in England and Wales, was called cock-throwing, cock-thrashing or cock-threshing. A cock was tied by the leg to a stake, and the players threw sticks at it until it was dead. Alternatively, they were blindfolded and beat at it with their sticks. It was a popular fairground activity. You paid your tuppence or whatever, and if you could kill the cock it was yours to keep.

*At Shrovetide to shroving,
Go thresh the fat hen,
If blindfold can kill her,
Then give it thy men.*

Why were cocks singled out for victimisation at Shrovetide? Well, eggs were off the menu in Lent, so the cock’s services were not required for a while. Meat was required for Shrove Tuesday, so the cock was an obvious victim. And slaughtering some spunky farmyard animal was the nearest thing to the thrill of the chase that many people were allowed. But it was a question that antiquarians also asked, and they came up with quite a variety of answers.

In ‘The British Apollo’ of 1708, the answer was attributed to a German author called Cranenstein. He, it seems, had told a story of how, when England was ruled by the Danes, the Anglo-Saxons in a certain place decided to rise up and murder their masters in the middle of the night. Their plan was foiled by the fluttering and crowing of cocks, after which the Danes made their lives more miserable than ever. It had happened on a Shrove Tuesday, so when the Danes were gone the Anglo-Saxons took to celebrating the anniversary by taking it out on their cocks.

Then, a writer in the ‘Gentleman’s Magazine’ for January 1737 attributed the custom to a much more recent enemy. The cock, he pointed out, had the misfortune to be called in Latin by the same word that signified a Frenchman – *Gallus*. “In our wars with France, in former ages, our ingenious forefathers invented this emblematical way of expressing their derision of and resentment towards that nation; and poor Monsieur at the stake was pelted by Men and Boys in a very rough and hostile manner.”

Next, a writer in the July 1783 issue said: “The barbarous practice of throwing at a Cock tied to a stake at Shrove-tide, I think I have read, has an allusion to the indignities offered by the Jews to the Saviour of the World before His Crucifixion.” It’s possible to guess where he might have read it. In ‘The Gentleman’s Journal; or, the Monthly Miscellany’ for January 1692–93 are some verses ‘On a Cock at Rochester’ by Sir Charles Sedley which include the lines

*May thou be punish’d for St Peter’s crime,
And on Shrove Tuesday perish in thy prime.*

The reference is to the story in all four gospels of how Peter denied Our Lord. In Matthew 26, for example, Christ says: “This night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.” And at the end of the same chapter, when someone asks Peter if he is one of Christ’s disciples, he begins to curse and swear, saying, “I know not the man.” The cock promptly crows, and Peter leaves, weeping bitterly.

It’s a story eminently suited to the beginning of Lent. It’s odd that St Peter’s guilt is transferred to the

innocent cock, but that would appear to be exactly how people thought of it. There is a very curious little piece of verse in volume 1 of Alexander Carmichael's 'Carmina Gadelica' on the same subject. It follows an equally curious poem about Joseph's marriage to Mary. Before the first item Carmichael writes: "The two following poems were got in Kintail. They are obscure in themselves, and the dialect of Kintail in which they were recited increases their obscurity. The reciters repeated them as one poem, but were uncertain whether they were one or two poems."

The version of 'An Coileach Sin' ('That Cock') which Carmichael selected for printing was given to him by Mary Macrae, dairy-woman, Taobh-tuath, Harris (from Kintail), but he also got something similar from Alexander Matheson, shipmaster, Dornie, the collector of the celebrated 'Dornie Manuscripts'. Here is Mary Macrae's version, verse by verse, with Carmichael's translation and my own comments.

*Sin 'd uair labhair a bhean bhorb –
'Is iad na coirb a rinn mo chreach,
Cuir am breugaire sìos fo lorg,
'S bidh do bheatha nìos dha m' theach.*

("It was then spoke the rude woman – / 'It was the wicked who made my ruin, / Drive the liar down below the beam, / And thou shalt be welcome to my house.") Surely the third line means 'Put down the liar under a cudgel'. Could it be a reference to Shrovetide cock-threshing?

*An coileach sin agad 's a phoit,
Air a phronnadh cho broit ri cal,
Cha teid am breugadair an sloc
Gon an goir e air an sparr.'*

("That cock thou hast in the pot, / Chopped as broken as the kail, / The liar shall not go to the pit / Till he shall crow upon the spar.") What Carmichael calls the 'spar' is the hen-roost. *Broit* should be *brèid* ('bruised'). If the *breugadair* ('liar') is human, like St Peter, *sloc* ('pit') will mean Hell – when the cock crows, the liar will go to Hell. If the *breugadair* is the cock himself, the *sloc* will be the cockpit. For crowing on the roost after St Peter's denials, he is consigned to the cockpit.

*Chair an coileach air an sparr,
Chairich e dha sgiath r'a chorp,
Ghoir e ann gu blasdar, binn,
Is thainig mo Rìgh bho 'n chroibh.*

("The cock went upon the spar, / He placed his two wings to his body, / He crew sweetly, melodiously, / And my King came from the tree.") For rhyme, *chorp* should be *thaobh* ('side') and *chroibh* should be *chraoibh* (still 'tree'). I suppose it refers to Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, emerging from the trees to be betrayed by Judas.

*An dream nach miannach le Dia
Luchd nam breug is luchd nam mionn;
B' annsa leis an urnuigh fhior
Is li nan rosg a ruith gu teann.*

("The people not liked of God / Are those who lie and those who swear; / Rather would He have the genuine prayer / And water from the eyelids flowing swiftly.") *Li nan rosg* will be 'the colour of the eyes' rather than 'water from the eyelids', but the meaning is essentially the same. As St Matthew says of Peter, "Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man."

"And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly."

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