

Mothers' Day and cailleachs fried in butter

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

AS some of the ads in this paper will tell you, this Sunday is Mothers' Day, traditionally known as Mothering Sunday. You may have wondered how it came about, or how the date is arrived at, or whether it has any Gaelic connections.

Well, let me explain it like this. We are halfway through Lent. Lent began on Ash Wednesday, which fell this year on 28 February. Like Advent before Christmas, Lent is a process of 'countdown' as you calculate the declining number of days to a great event, a great release, in this case Easter and the end of the Fast.

Mothering Sunday is Mid-Lent Sunday. Counting from Shrove Sunday to Easter Sunday inclusive, there are fifty days in Lent – seven weeks. But Shrove Sunday is before Ash Wednesday, so a more convenient calculation is one based on the Gaelic for Lent, *an Carghas*, which comes in turn from Latin *quadragesima* and means 'forty days'. There are forty days of fasting in Lent, because the Sundays are not fast-days. Among those forty days are five Sundays, of which the middle one is Mothering Sunday.

According to Ronald Hutton's book 'The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain', the first ever reference to the day is in the journal of a royalist officer called Richard Symonds for 1644. "Every Mid-Lent Sunday is a great day at Worcester, when all the children and godchildren meet at the head and chief of the family and have a feast. They call it the Mothering-day."

What Symonds seems to mean is that the adult siblings come together to honour their mother (or godmother) wherever she happens to be living. Hutton points out that Symonds was from Essex and that the tradition was unfamiliar to him, nor did he encounter it anywhere else on his marches across southern England. But four years later Robert Herrick published a poem entitled 'A Ceremonie in Gloucester' which included the following:

*I'le to thee a simnell bring,
'Gainst thou go'st a mothering,
So that, when she blesseth thee,
Half that blessing thou'lt give me.*

My dictionary defines a simnel as 'a sweet cake usually covered with marzipan for Christmas, Easter, or Mothering Sunday', but apparently a simnel at that time was simply a cake made from fine flour, from Latin *simila* ('fine flour').

It seems then that the custom was rooted in the area around the lower Severn, which flows through Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. Hutton points out that two different things happened over the next couple of centuries. Firstly, the tradition of celebrating Mothering Sunday gradually spread north to Lancashire, south to Devon, east to Leicestershire, and west to mid-Wales (where it was called *Dydd Sul y Meibion*, "Sons' Sunday").

Secondly, the custom changed emphasis. Only in Lancashire (to where it had furthest to travel) did it remain a private affair. Elsewhere it developed into a holiday on which live-in apprentices and domestic servants, who might be as little as ten years old, were allowed to go home and visit their families (which meant journeying on Saturday evening and Monday morning).

In the kitchens of big houses on the Saturday there would be a frenzy of baking as wonderful cakes were made with all the best ingredients in the larder for the servants to take home to their mothers. "As standards of living rose," says Hutton, "Worcestershire and Shropshire took to veal and Warwickshire to pork stuffed with bay leaves." I take it from this that in the area where the custom had begun as a tribute to mothers, mothers were now hard at work cooking gargantuan meals to celebrate themselves.

Eventually, just as we saw happening with Valentine's Day a month ago, the custom died and had to be re-invented. No doubt the coming of trains and the decline of English Sabbatarianism helped to kill it – suddenly young people could go home to Mum every Sunday if they wanted. "What revived it," says Hutton, "was the determination of a Miss Anna Jarvis of Philadelphia, whose guiding passion in life was a devotion to her own mother."

He explains: "Miss Jarvis was well-connected enough to turn her personal obsessions into public laws, and her tireless lobbying caused the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States to legislate in 1913 that the second Sunday in May should be set aside as a national day of remembrance of mothers. It seems to have been the arrival of American soldiers in the Second World War which introduced the concept to England, where the memory of the old Mothering Sunday was still strong enough for the two to become merged."

Manufacturers saw their chance. Once bakers and confectioners had turned out simnel cakes; now people like Valentines of Dundee turned out cards in their thousands. The rest is history. Or maybe I should say: "The rest is shopping".

In his book 'Welsh Folk Customs', Trefor M. Owen cites a little rhyme about the eight Sundays of Lent (counting Shrove Sunday):

*Dydd Sul Ynyd, Dydd Sul hefyd,
Dydd Sul a ddaw, Dydd Sul gerllaw,
Dydd Sul y Meibion, Dydd Sul y Gwrychon,
Dydd Sul y Blodau, Pasg a'i dyddiau.*

("Shrove Sunday, another Sunday, / Sunday will come, Sunday nearby, / Sons' Sunday, Carling Sunday, Flowering Sunday, Easter and its days.") Carling, Carlin or Carl Sunday, in Welsh *Dydd Sul y Pys* or *Dydd Sul y Gwrychon*, is the one following Mothers' Day and was celebrated in Wales, in Lowland Scotland, and in the northern counties of England. All of its names refer to peas. Generally speaking, the 'carlings' of England were peas fried in butter or pancakes of pease meal, while the *gwrychon* of Wales were peas steeped overnight in water, milk, wine, cider or the

like, then put to dry, and finally boiled for eating.

The people of Llansanffraid-ym-Mechain in Montgomeryshire had a very Celtic way of celebrating *Sul y Pys*: they roasted peas or wheat grains and ate them on top of a hill called *Y Foel*, along with water from a well on the hill. As for Scotland, one source describes the carlins as 'grey peas, steeped all night in water and fried the next day with butter'. In Ritson's 'Scottish Songs' is a verse:

*There'll be all the lads and lasses
Set down in the midst of the ha'
With sybows, and ryfarts, and carlings
That are both sodden and raw.*

Sybows are onions, of course, while ryfarts are radishes. Alexander Maxwell's 'Old Dundee' speaks of filial offerings on 'Car Sunday' known as carlins or car-cakes – 'a dainty formed into a kind of pancake flavoured with well spiced condiments'. And a paper by J. Spence in the 'Transactions of the Buchan Field Club' of 1896–98 has this to say: "Although a good Protestant and Presbyterian I have taken part in the observance of Carlin Sunday, Mid-Lent Sunday."

Spence goes on: "In my own experience in my youth in Morayshire, the Sunday broth-pot was well filled with field pease which had been thoroughly steeped on Saturday, and now on Sunday, after being boiled and seasoned with salt and pepper, eaten directly out of the pot by the company. This was 'eating our carlins', and it was not an uncommon thing to invite some neighbouring young people to partake of the family feast on their way home from morning church. Brose and bannocks for Shrove Tuesday and boiled pease for Mid-Lent were . . . the chief materials for the feasts of our forefathers."

Why then were the peas called *gwrychon* or carlins? The authors of 'British Calendar Customs: England' thought that 'carlin' derived from 'care' in the sense of mourning or sorrow, referring to the Passion of Christ. But a 'carlin' in Scots is a hag, what we would call in Gaelic a *cailleach*, and the Welsh would call a *gwrach*. That then is what lies behind *gwrychon* – 'hags'.

In Gaelic Scotland the last week of March belongs to the *cailleach*. The 25th of March every year is *Latha na Cailliche*, Lady Day, the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, when Christ was conceived – nine months before Christmas. The *cailleach* here is no hag, but a married lady who wore the *caille* ('hood' or 'veil'), just as Moslem wives do today.

Very much in the sense of a wizened old woman, however, the *cailleach* is the shrill, cold wind that blows during this week of the year, and a great deal else besides. She is the goddess of winter and of starvation. Tradition shows her trying to beat down the growing grass in April with her clothes-mallet. She is ritually sacrificed on the eve of the May quarter-day. She is the last sheaf of corn from the first field reaped in harvest, a loathed object decked in ribbons and forced upon the man most behindhand with his own reaping.

Her roles go on through the calendar. She is the main figure in a death-and-resurrection dance performed at harvest home, *Cailleach an Dùdain*, 'the Hag of the Quern-Dust' (as such, she gave her name to this column). She is a gnarled stump of wood brought in from copse or bog and burned on Christmas Eve, thus averting harm for another year. On New Year's Eve, *Oidhche Challainn*, in the form of the sheaf or the ashes of the stump, she is beaten to death by stick-wielding revellers. The remains of the sheaf are fed to the first plough-team to be harnessed in spring, and thus she enters the soil to recommence the cycle.

Against this background, we can see the carlins, carlings or *gwrychon* of March as a ritual meal in which one of the fruits of the previous harvest was consumed to symbolise the return of growth. Peas or pease-meal, being green or yellow-green in colour, must have been chosen to represent the reappearance of green in the fields.

In the Highlands and Islands where peas were rare, the custom did not exist. But the *cailleach* is a figure of such antiquity that she is likely to underlie the traditions of other parts of Britain where Celtic beliefs lingered longest – in this case, Wales, Lowland Scotland, and, yes, even the north of England.

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