

A new old custom: Sowans Friday

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THIS isn't a Good Friday sermon. It may seem like one, because it's about Good Friday and expounds a text. But my text isn't from scripture. It's a few words in Perthshire Gaelic noted down by the folklorist Lady Evelyn Stewart Murray in 1891 from Peter Stewart, a native of the Atholl village of Balnaguard – a name familiar to anyone today whose business brings him up and down the A9. Peter said: *Air Di-Haoine an Làgain bha aig na h-uile pròidseach balaich bha san àite dol 'shir' caorainn agus rachadh an caorainn 'bhog' anns an làgan, agus bioran dheth air 'chur air ceann na h-uile beothach anns na h-uile àite. Chumadh sin air folbh na buidseachan gu ceann bliadhna.*

Before translating, let me fill in some background. You're probably reading this on Maundy (Holy) Thursday or Good Friday. Tradition tells us that Thursday was the day of the last supper, and Friday the day of the crucifixion.

The English names don't reflect that, but the Gaelic ones do. "Maundy Thursday" is from French *mandé*, Latin *mandatum*, referring to Christ's "command" at the last supper (John 13:34): "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another."

"Good Friday" isn't so simple, but Ronald Hutton explains it for us in his fascinating book "The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain". The ever-practical Anglo-Saxons, he says, called it "Long Friday" because of its endless religious services, but by the high Middle Ages the more pious name "Good Friday" had crept in from Germany, where *Gottes Freytag* ("God's Friday") seems to have turned into *Gute Freytag* ("Good Friday").

Nothing about suppers or crucifixions there, then. For these we must turn to the Gaelic names. *Di-Haoine a' Cheusaidh* has also survived as *Di-Haoine na Ceusta* or even *Ceusa*. *Ceusta* was as good a genitive case of the word as *Ceusaidh*, but had a feminine look to it. Whatever way you look at it, however, the name means "Crucifixion Friday".

Maundy Thursday is *Diar-Doain Bangaid* ("Banquet Thursday") or *Diar-Doain a' Bhrochain Mhóir* ("Big Porridge Thursday", "Big Gruel Thursday"). There are two reasons why it should have been called this. One is that when Gaelic-speaking people thought of an important meal they were better able to visualise it as a hot one of porridge than a cold one of bread and wine.

This seems to suggest a lack of knowledge of scripture (and ritual), for the gospels single out bread and wine as the ingredients of the last supper. Which brings us to the other reason. After dark on Holy Thursday each year, on the west coast and in the islands, a man waded out into the sea bearing a gift of porridge, gruel or ale and poured it into the waves in the name of *Manannan* or of *Seónaidh*. The purpose was to ensure a plentiful supply of seaweed with which to enrich the fields and produce a good crop of food in the coming year.

Manannan was the sea-god of the Celts, but his name became that of a Christian saint, and various churches are dedicated to him in Ireland and Scotland. *Seónaidh* is, I take it, St John the Baptist. Manannan can only have turned into *Seónaidh* because they were both so strongly associated with water. John the Baptist was not present at the last supper, of course, having suffered death by decapitation, but in the absence of precise scriptural knowledge I imagine the fact that he was the precursor of Christ was good enough for the people to remember him on Holy Thursday.

I've written about Big Porridge Day on this page before (more than once!) and if you want to know more about it you'll find it duly indexed under "B" in my book "The Gaelic Otherworld". So let's turn to my text. It's about *làgan*, sowans, which is a poor cousin of porridge made from oat husks. In the west and in the islands it was called *cabhraich*. First you steeped the husks with some fine meal in water for about a week, then you strained them through a cloth. You left the liquor in a jar to ferment and separate, and the solid matter at the bottom was the sowans. When you boiled it with water and salt it turned into a thick jelly. This you ate like porridge, adding a little butter if you had any. The word "sowans" is supposed to be from Gaelic *sùghan*, "little juice" or "bran-juice", despite the proverb: *Chan fheòil grùthan, 's cha shùghan làgan*. "Liver is not meat, and sowans is not bran-juice."

What Peter Stewart says is this. "On Sowans Friday every young lad in the place went to collect rowans, and the rowan would be dipped in the sowans, and a twig of it would be put on the head of every farm animal everywhere. That would keep away the witches till a year had passed."

So here in Atholl, far from the sea, is a custom performed on a Friday which involved sacrificing a porridge-related dish for the good of the farm. I don't know any Friday in the year that has the status of a calendar festival except Good Friday. Could there be a connection between Sowans Friday in the southern central Highlands and Big Porridge Day in the west?

To answer this, we must look for evidence that associates the custom with Holy Thursday or with fertilising the fields. How about this, written by John Ramsay of Ochtertyre about 1800, and published in "Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century" by Alexander Allardyce? It relates to Breadalbane – the Loch Tay district, next door to Atholl. "On the Thursday before Easter, it is customary in some parts of Breadalbane for the landlady to send out the boys to carry home a stick of rowan-tree. Plenty of barley is boiled in a pot, and meal is added till a thick pudding is formed, which is always stirred about with the rowan-tree stick.

"And when the sun begins to set on the dunghill, the landlady looks out for fear of any spectator; then takes the stick with as much of the pudding as will adhere to it, and buries it in the top of the dunghill. This, it is thought, will add much to its fertilising qualities. The pudding serves the whole family for supper, and next day for breakfast."

Here the rowan is dipped in a pudding of barleymeal rather than in sowans, but it's sacrificed to the dunghill after sunset on Holy Thursday – precisely the moment when the people of Barvas, for example, were setting out for the shore to present their gift to Seónaidh. Then the pudding is eaten on Good Friday itself.

So the connection is made. But other authors of the same generation pick up the custom and tell us more. In his “Tour of Scotland in 1769” Thomas Pennant, a Welsh traveller, says: “In some parts of the country is a rural sacrifice, different from that before-mentioned. A cross is cut on some sticks, which is dipped in pottage, and the *Thursday* before *Easter* one of each placed over the sheep-cot, the stable, or the cow-house.

“On the 1st of *May* they are carried to the hill where the rites are celebrated, all decked with wild flowers, and after the feast is over, re-placed over the spots they were taken from; and this was originally styled *Clou-än-Beltein*, or the split branch of the fire of the rock. These follies are now seldom practised, and that with the utmost secrecy; for the Clergy are indefatigable in discouraging every species of superstition.”

Here the sticks (type of wood not mentioned) are dipped in “pottage” (ingredients unspecified), then the connection with protecting livestock is made explicit. But the intriguing thing is the linkage between Holy Thursday, a Christian festival, and Beltane (May-Day), a pre-Christian one. On 1 May, it seems, the rowans are borrowed from “the sheep-coat, the stable, or the cow-house”, decked with flowers, and called *clobha thein’ Bealltainn*, which I’d translate as “the tongs of the Beltane fire”. They are used to prod the fire, I suppose, then returned to “the sheep-coat, the stable, or the cow-house” in a singed condition.

Why was this done? For an answer we can turn finally to the Rev. Lachlan Shaw’s “History of the Province of Moray”, first published in 1775, which describes the custom as it was practised on the other side of the Drumochter (in Badenoch and Strathspey) by “herds” (boys who herd cattle). He explains the *clobha* or “split branch” and says that it’s of “Service wood” (rowan). “Upon Maundy Thursday the several herds cut staves of Service wood about three feet long, and put two cross sticks into clefts in one end of the staff. These staves they laid up till the first of May.

“On that day several herds met together; every one had two eggs, and a bannock or thick cake of oat-meal crusted over with the yolks of eggs. They raised the pile of dry wood or sticks on a hillock, and striking fire with a flint they kindled the pile; then they made the *Deas-Soil* thrice round the fire; after which they roasted their eggs and eat them with a part of the bread. The rest of the bread they brought home to be eaten by the family; and having adorned the heads of their staves with wild herbs, they fixed them on the top, or above the doors of their several cots; and this they fancied would preserve the cattle from diseases till next May.”

By *Deas-Soil* he means the *deiseal* or “right-hand turn”. The herds walk three times round the fire of rowan sticks. The food (a “Beltane bannock” and two eggs each) doesn’t appear till May-Day. The sticks, topped by crosses, are burnt in a curious parody of the crucifixion. Finally, in a charred condition, but adorned with flowers, they’re fixed above the byres (“cots”). The purpose is to protect the cattle during the coming year.

This is an Easter celebration, pushed back to May-Day when Easter fell out of favour after the Reformation. May-Day was an older festival than Easter anyway, and certain elements, notably the use of rowan, the fertilisation of the ground and the protection of cattle, belonged to May-Day in the first place. Others, like the adoration of the crucifix, the bread with special powers (today’s hot cross buns), and the striking of fresh fire from flints to light the Paschal candle, belonged to Good Friday as celebrated in medieval times.

“Sowans Friday” thus stands in a tradition of festivals in their decline being named after food. Likewise, Shrove Tuesday is now Pancake Tuesday.

I’m grateful to **WHFP** reader Mrs Sylvia Robertson, Lettoch Place, Pitlochry, for sending me Peter Stewart’s words. Along with Patricia Young, Mrs Robertson has written a delightful biography of Lady Evelyn (who was a very unwilling aristocrat!) called “Daughter of Atholl”. Now, with Tony Dilworth, she’s preparing a complete edition of Lady Evelyn’s collection of Gaelic folklore. It will be a very welcome addition to our knowledge.

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