

A day to be avoided

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I WAS emailed recently by an old friend. “I’m enjoying your book ‘The Gaelic Otherworld’,” he said. “But I can’t find any reference to the meaning of ‘a Dismal Day’. Do you know what it was?”

That’s a real “Quern-Dust” kind of question. I was delighted to tell him, and he thanked me profusely, saying: “I’ve been trying to find this out for more years than I care to remember.”

It left me pondering the nature of the internet. Firstly, wasn’t my friend asking a typical internet question? I’ve always found the internet very good on the English language, its literature and history, shading gradually away into uncertainty and ignorance as you move from England and America into small countries and indigenous cultures like Gaelic. Secondly, doesn’t everyone have access to the internet, or close friends and relatives who have access to it?

Well, apparently not. There’s room for the old “Quern-Dust Calendar” yet, even when the question seems to have nothing to do with Gaelic.

The “Dismal Days” are as old as the calendar itself. People have always considered some days as particularly lucky or unlucky, good or bad. The Latin for “bad days” is *dies mali*. In Old French this became *dis mal*. When this was adopted into English in the middle ages, “days” was added by way of explanation: “dismal days”. The last stage in the process was reached when “dismal” began to be thought of as an adjective meaning “wretched” or “gloomy”. Of course that’s how we use it today.

Which days were they, exactly? Well, the “Oxford English Dictionary” is remarkably clear on that point. It lists them as 1 and 25 January, 4 and 26 February, 1 and 28 March, 10 and 20 April, 3 and 25 May, 10 and 16 June, 13 and 22 July, 1 and 30 August, 3 and 21 September, 3 and 22 October, 5 and 28 November, 7 and 22 December.

Why the OED is quite so sure is beyond me. I’ve seen lists which are completely different. There’s a very long list, for example, in a calendar prefixed to Grafton’s *Chronicle of 1565*. (I take this from the “bible” of superstition, John Brand’s “*Observations on Popular Antiquities*”, where “popular antiquities” is what we would now call “folklore”, a word which was only invented in 1846.)

This is Grafton’s list: “January 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 15, 17, 29, very unlucky. February 26, 27, 28, unlucky; 8, 10, 17, very unlucky. March 16, 17, 20, very unlucky. April 7, 8, 10, 20, unlucky; 16, 21, very unlucky. May 3, 6, unlucky; 7, 15, 20, very unlucky. June 10, 22, unlucky; 4, 8, very unlucky.

“July 15, 21, very unlucky. August 1, 29, 30, unlucky; 19, 20, very unlucky. September 3, 4, 21, 23, unlucky; 6, 7, very unlucky. October 4, 16, 24, unlucky; 6, very unlucky. November 5, 6, 29, 30, unlucky; 15, 20, very unlucky. December 15, 22, unlucky; 6, 7, 9, very unlucky.”

This sort of thing may seem like nonsense when you find it in the **WHFP**, but does it seem like nonsense when you’re reading the horoscope in some other paper, or in a glossy magazine? For the people of times gone past, it was an attempt to seek sensible advice on how to run their lives when they had choices to make. A great deal of medical practice involved drawing blood, for example, so what was the best day to do it, and what were the days to be avoided?

There was always money to be made in this way by soothsayers and publishers of almanacs, but in 1636 Lord Burghley, a well-educated person, quite sensibly advised his son that although he personally thought there was no such thing as a bad day to undertake some good enterprise or business, many learned authorities advised caution with regard to three particular Mondays in the year, “which I leave to thine owne consideration, either to use or refuse”. These were: “1. The first Munday in April, which Day Caine was born, and his brother Abel slaine. 2. The second Munday in August, which Day Sodome and Gomorrah were destroyed. 3. The last Munday in December, which Day Judas was born, that betrayed our Saviour Christ.”

This is helpful. It shows how the idea of dismal days can be understood as an attempt to plan the future by learning the lessons of the past. It also shows that different people’s minds

work in different ways. We might have expected Lord Burghley to see the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a good thing; but no, he takes an enlightened modern view of the event as a mass slaughter and therefore a bad thing.

Now, if you like playing number games, you may have noticed that the two lists I gave you are not entirely different. There are – would you believe it! – thirteen days which occur in both. These are 1 January, 26 February, 10 and 20 April, 3 May, 10 June, 1 and 30 August, 3 and 21 September, 5 November, 7 and 22 December. It's worth adding that another list given by Brand, from the "Book of Knowledge" of 1658, offers only one day in the year which agrees with anything in both the OED and Grafton – 5 November.

Is this an indication of how it was done? A list prior to 1605 gives 5 November as one of the *dies mali*; in 1605 the Gunpowder Plot takes place on 5 November; this confirms that the *dies mali* are to be believed; 5 November goes on everyone's list of unlucky days from now on; the idea that the Plot was foiled, so 5 November could equally be argued to be a *lucky* day, never occurs to anyone.

Personally I'm interested in the fact that 3 May pops up twice. For one thing, I'm writing this on 3 May, it's election day, and I have absolutely no idea what the outcome of the election is going to be. Of course you will know what has happened when you read this. I certainly hope it won't prove to be an unlucky day for *everybody*.

In Gaelic tradition – and this *is* in "The Gaelic Otherworld"! – 3 May was so unlucky that the day of the week on which it fell was called *Latha Seachnaidh na Bliadhna*, "the Avoiding Day of the Year". Whatever day that was, it remained unlucky throughout the entire year. Thomas Pennant, the Welsh traveller, put it like this in his account of a tour of Scotland in 1769: "A *Highlander* never begins any thing of consequence on the day of the week on which the 3d of *May* falls, which he styles *La Sheachanna na bleanagh*, or the dismal day."

We have to ask why 3 May was so unlucky. John Gregorson Campbell searched far and wide for an explanation, and only ever heard one that satisfied him: it was on this day that the fallen angels were expelled from Paradise (Rev. 12: 9), so if people do anything bad on 3 May, they will similarly be expelled from the regions of forgiveness, and visited with "judgement without mercy". Another explanation given in "The Gaelic Otherworld" is that it derives from Whit Sunday, the unluckiest day of the year in Ireland.

Worst of all was if 3 May was a Thursday. Which it is, as I write. I think this was because Thursday, Calum Cille's day, would normally have been regarded as extremely lucky, and it was felt that *Latha Seachnaidh na Bliadhna* would cancel this out. So for example a child born when 3 May fell on a Thursday would be deprived of Calum Cille's patronage and would have to be strong to survive. This is reflected in a saying:

*Is maìrg as màthair do mhac an maòth
Nuair as Diar-Daoin a' Bhealltainn.*

"Sad is the mother of a baby son / When Beltane falls on a Thursday." I believe this brings us to the nub of the issue, for if you thought *Bealltainn* was 1 May, think again.

1 May is *Latha Buidhe Bealltainn*, the Lucky Day of Beltane. That suggests there was an unlucky one. There was a struggle over this and all the other quarter-days in the middle ages between the Church and the people. The church, who owned and ran the calendar, tried to wean the people off their traditional festivals by moving them a day or two and giving them religious names. The real *Bealltainn* was variously declared to be the Feast of Saints Philip and James, St Helen's Day, or the Feast of the Invention (Finding) of the Holy Cross (or Rood). Curiously, that makes it "Holyrood Day", known traditionally in Gaelic as *Féill na Croise*, *Féill an Ròid* or *Latha an Ròid*.

All this multiplicity of names reeks of desperation. The Church lost out first to tradition, then to protestantism, and one way or another the keeping of *Bealltainn* on 3 May came to be regarded as unlucky.

If I were superstitious I wouldn't have voted today at all. If I were superstitious *and* in charge of elections, Thursday 3 May is the last day in the entire year I would have picked. I wonder what on earth is going to happen?

11 May 2007