

## The Gaelic Christmas

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IF anyone were to write the history of Christmas in Gaelic Scotland, I'd suggest dividing it into four periods and eight topics. There's horrendous confusion between Christmas and New Year customs, and isolating periods and topics would help tease the two festivals apart.

The periods would be these. First there's the Middle Ages, when the Highlands and Islands had a great deal in common with the Lowlands, England and Ireland, and were served by a clergy tolerant of tradition. Christmas was more important than New Year, and its customs (both religious and secular) continued through to the Epiphany, but New Year was celebrated in its own right by the superstitious.

In Early Modern times, from 1560, the Catholic clergy were swept away, Christmas (*Nollaig*) was officially abolished, and the keeping of all festivals but the Sabbath came to rest merely on popular and family tradition. It became safer to celebrate New Year than Christmas, so some customs were permanently transferred to the later festival. *Nollaig Mhór* came to mean Christmas, *Nollaig Bheag* the New Year.

The Modern period began with the switch to the Gregorian Calendar in 1752 and continued with the conversion of almost the entire Highlands and Islands to evangelical Presbyterianism. These two processes virtually eliminated what was left of Christmas, which now fell on 5 or 6 January, Old Style. We hear much of Old New Year (12 or 13 January) until well into the twentieth century, but hardly anything of Old Christmas. *Nollaig Mhór*, then *Nollaig* itself, came to mean New Year's Day.

Even in our Post-Modern period, when Christmas trees and turkeys flood in with Santa, Rudolph and the rest, there's a story to be told – of the decline in first-footing, the demise of our more distinctive New Year customs, and the saga of Ian Macdonald, a Free Church headmaster who fought a long battle in the 1970s with Inverness-shire County Council over the erection of a Christmas tree in his school.

So you can see that many of our indigenous Christmas customs survived as New Year ones, leaving Christmas as a blank sheet to be filled up again by imports from elsewhere.

Now for my eight topics. The elements that made up a genuine Gaelic Christmas seem to have been guising, gifts, candles, logs, food, carols, games and animal traditions. Let's look at each of these, noting how far it was transferred to the New Year.

Guising (also called "mumming") means going around in disguise and performing certain rituals which in other traditions gained the status of plays or pantomimes. Outside Scotland it was mainly a Christmas custom. With us, it seems to have switched almost entirely to New Year, the rituals becoming focused on renewal: the expulsion of evil, the blessing of the house.

Alexander Carmichael, who always tried to display Highland tradition as ancient but Christian, presented guising as taking place at Christmas. No doubt it *originally* did: the question is whether it was still being done at Christmas (25 December, 5 or 6 January) during his lifetime (1832–1912). I doubt it; and when he mentions *Nollaig* we should usually retranslate it as "New Year".

That said, some elements of guising *do* belong clearly to Christmas. The guisers dressed up in long white shirts, conical hats and masks, often made of animal skin with holes for the eyes. Carmichael tells us that "the 'rejoicers' wore long white shirts for surplices, and very tall white hats for mitres", but avoids mentioning the masks. I agree with him that the guisers were dressing up as bishops, or indeed as Santa Claus (St Nicholas, bishop of Myra), who until a century ago was routinely shown wearing his mitre.

Carmichael tells us that the guisers brought with them the skin of "a white male lamb without spot or blemish". This, we know, was used outside the houses to make a drumming noise. Once inside it served another function: a real child, or a doll, was placed on the skin and carried three times sunwise round the fire to the accompaniment of singing. This is suggestive of Christmas.

Guising was done at Hallowe'en, when the guisers were mainly girls, as well as at New Year, when they were boys, and it always involved an element of cross-dressing. At New Year it could be violent and risky for girls, because of the darkness and the drinking. So

when our sources for *Nollaig* mention girls taking part, the chances are, again, that they really do mean Christmas.

One example of this is nineteenth-century Golspie. The girls went guising with white gowns over their clothes, decorated with bright ribbons, wearing their grandmothers' caps and masks of black muslin. The boys wore long overcoats, big hats pulled down to hide their faces, sometimes false faces and long white beards. They made the round of the houses singing comic songs and dancing, and might be rewarded with a penny. This was clearly a Christmas activity.

Next, gifts. In the rural Highlands there was no question of these taking any form but food or drink. The New Year guisers expected to receive such gifts at each house. Look up *bannag* in Dwelly, and you'll find it means Christmas present, New Year's gift, Christmas cake and bannock all rolled into one; in fact it seems to come from the Scots word "bannock". In Lewis *Oidhche nam Bannag* was a common name for Hogmanay – or was it Christmas Eve?

On Christmas Day in Argyll, especially, the gift was of *sùghan*, sowens: people went about with their sowens, girls giving to boys and boys to girls. Sowens (or flummery) is made by steeping, boiling and straining the farina remaining among the husks of oats. With milk it was called *lagan*. In the Eastern Highlands the Christmas delicacy was *lagan leathbhruich* or "parboiled flummery", made by boiling the juice with butter, sugar or treacle into a jelly. It could be taken as breakfast in bed, or served later to everyone in the house.

Light was vital to Christmas. Burning candles, the bigger the better, was a universal Christmas custom, and a visitor to the Western Isles reported long ago that the Yule candle was made big enough there to burn for twelve nights. As far as I know, the custom was not transferred to the New Year, the only confusion being a matter of words: *Oidhche Choilne* ("Calendar Night", New Year's Eve) was sometimes misunderstood as *Oidhche Choinnle* ("Candle Night") and applied to Christmas Eve!

Another Christmas custom that stayed put was the Yule log or *cailleach Nollaig*. Some gnarled stump of wood was brought in in advance from copse, bog or ebb-tide and burned on Christmas Eve on top of the peats. This averted harm for another year. At Corgarff in Highland Aberdeenshire, called the "Yeel Cyarlin", it was laid on the fire between 8 and 9 p.m. and the "Yeel Bread" was baked over it. Part of it was kept to kindle the fire on Christmas morning. In the Western Isles its charred remains were kept till the following Christmas, when they served to light the new log; their presence was a safeguard against fire.

Next, food. There's a clear distinction between Christmas, the festival of the family meal, and New Year, when food was laid aside for guisers and other visitors. Christmas food in the Highlands included scones, cakes and bannocks of all kinds and a great pudding or haggis for the evening meal, better still a goose, perhaps even a freshly killed sheep or goat. The most important thing was that there be some kind of meat.

*Cha robh samhradh riamh gun ghrian,  
Cha robh geamhradh riamh gun sneachd,  
Cha robh Nollaig Mhór gun fheadil  
No bean òg le deòin gun fhear.*

"Summer was never without sun, / Winter was never without snow, / Christmas Day was never without meat / Or willing young woman without a man." One Christmas Day was without meat, however – in the house of a Uistman, MacÙistein, who was unable to give his retainers their usual Christmas meal of seal-meat because of stormy weather. From which it was said: *Tha slabhraidh gun fheum ann an taigh MhicÙistein*. "There's an unused pot-chain in MacÙistein's house."

The feasting might go on for a long time. *Is òg an Nollaig a' chiad oidhche*, "Christmas is young the first night." Big or small, though, the Christmas feast became a target of Presbyterian zealotry. The Rev. Murdoch MacKenzie of Elgin searched the houses of the town at Christmas 1659 in an effort to root out the eating of roast goose, to which he had no objection on any other day of the year. "These feathers," he told the people, "will rise up against you one day."

Carols next. If you look at items 55 to 68 in volume one of "Carmina Gadelica" you'll find the whole Christmas / New Year problem encapsulated. Of these fourteen traditional

poems, only two can safely be called carols, only five are pure New Year rhymes. The rest show a tradition in flux: Christmas and New Year elements mixed together, carols with begging or house-blessing elements thrown in, perhaps disguised by Carmichael's translation.

With regard to games, the crucial difference was this: Christmas was about indoor games, including children's ones; New Year's Day was almost synonymous with shinty.

Finally, animal traditions are unique to Christmas, probably because Christ was born in a stable. In Breadalbane it was believed that at midnight on Christmas Eve the cows in the byre would go down on their knees, and that at 3 a.m. the bees would leave their hives, returning immediately. In Angus, at least, it was said that the bees sang on Christmas morning. In Lismore all the animals were remembered that day – cattle and horses got a sheaf of corn in the stall, sheaves were spread for sheep in the fields, even the birds were given a sheaf of oats, hung on a tree or tied to a pole.

Of our eight topics, then, four remained exclusively attached to Christmas. The example of guising suggests that these survived because they were practised in the bosom of the family where the likes of the Rev. Murdo couldn't easily root them out. The point is proven by shinty – in Catholic Eigg it was recalled as being played on all the winter holidays, including Christmas as well as New Year's Day. You can't hide a shinty-match! But the extent of the shift is quantified by our fourteen poems – two carols, seven mixed, five New Year rhymes.

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