

## Happy New Year?

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

*BLIADHNA Mhath Ùr!* Or *Bliadhn' Ùr Mhath!* as I've often heard. Happy New Year! Whatever way you say it, nothing could be more normal at this time of year than that greeting, with a friendly handshake. But how deep are its roots in Gaelic tradition?

Not deep, I suspect. I'll tell you why. Tradition has handed down a lot of New Year rhymes. They were very actively used, because you couldn't get into a house on Hogmanay without one. Many were written down and published, along with their context. And on mulling through these, four things strike me: our greeting never occurs; no one shakes hands; the words *bliadhn' ùr* are hard to find; and so is the concept of "year" – the idea that the celebration has anything to do with a period of time lasting twelve months rather than a point of time lasting a night and a day.

Let's look at three *rannan Callainn* ("New Year rhymes") which actually contain the words *bliadhn' ùr*. Margaret Fay Shaw picked up one at South Lochboisdale. It's placed in the mouth of a little lad with bare feet. If I get *saoghal is ùine* ("long life and time"), he says, I'll be a warrior and have food and clothing. He ends:

*Ge bè bheir dhomh a' Challaig a-nochd  
Guma math théid a' bhliadhn' ùr leis!  
Fosgail an doras is lig a-staigh mi.*

"Whoever gives me my Hogmanay tonight, / May the New Year go well with him! / Open the door and let me in." That's as near as we get to the concept of "year". This used to be said in Glenmoriston:

*A Chullainn, Challainn, Chàisg,  
Buail am boiceann air an spàrr,  
Mur toir thu dhòmhsa mo bhannag  
Na biodh bliadhn' ùr agad gu bràth;  
Éirich a chaillich  
'S thoir a-nuas a' mhulchag chàis'.*

The first line is addressed to the festival, or its spirit in the form of a Hogmanay lad in his mask, hat and long white shirt. The rest means: "Strike the buckskin on the rafter, / If you don't give me my gift / May you never have a new year; / Get up old woman / And bring down the big cheese."

*Cullainn* and *Callainn* mean the same thing – "Calendar", from the Greek word *kalend* – but *Càisg* "Easter" sneaks in too, as in a *rann Callainn* from South Uist which declares: "Tonight's the night of the cross of pain, / The cross of pain on which Christ was crucified" (*Nochd oidhch' a' chrochaidh chruaidh, / Crann cruaidh ris na chrochadh Crìost*). These rhymes take positive pleasure in mixing festivals up!

The lads have an animal skin which they use for drumming. This is threatening behaviour – once indoors, they strike it on a rafter and curse the lady of the house into giving them something to eat. In fact aggression is an important feature. Dom Cyril Dieckhoff identified the reason in a Gaelic Society of Inverness talk in 1918 when he compared Gaelic New Year rhymes with Russian ones and said: "The rather impolite and bold language adopted by the youngsters in both countries when speaking to the old people in some of these rhymed addresses is very likely the outcome of the general idea of this feast, viz., that of giving the first place of importance to the young and growing generation, while the old ones have to take a back seat together with the declining winter."

I think that's it exactly. A symbolic pantomime in which the young rebelled against the old. Not a celebration of a new date in the calendar but of the lengthening day, of renewal and of hope, looking forward in midwinter to spring, summer and harvest. One common motif in the rhymes takes this to its logical conclusion, human sacrifice, euthanasia if you like:

*Chollainn sa, Challainn sa,  
 Bhuilg bhuidhe bhoicinn,  
 Buailibh an craiceann,  
 Cailleach sa chùil,  
 Cailleach sa chill,  
 Cailleach eile  
 An ceann an teine,  
 Stob 'na goile  
 'S i 'na teine dearg.*

“This *Collainn*, this *Callainn*, / Yellow bucksin bag, / Strike the skin, / An old wife in the corner, / An old wife in the grave, / Another old wife / At the fireside, / A stake in her stomach, / She goes up in red flames.”

Don't worry. The *cailleach* is the last sheaf of harvest, hung up over the fireplace to symbolise hunger and now, it seems, ceremonially murdered and burned by the young people as an act of defiance. Nevertheless, this bit of the pantomime must have made old ladies feel uncomfortable.

The third rhyme I've found with *bliadhn' ùr* in it was given by Donald Macdonald from North Tolsta and appears in “Tocher” no. 36-7. It consists mainly of demands for food and ends:

*A' chiad là den Bhliadhn' Ùir  
 Chunnacas Triùir a' dol don tràigh:  
 Shoillsich fearann, shoillsich fonn,  
 Shoillsich an tonn air an tràigh,  
 Shoillsich fiadh na beinne cais,  
 Shoillsich an coileach air an spàrr —  
 Spàrr fon a' choileach cheàrr.*

“The first day of the New Year / Three were seen going to the beach: / The land shone, the ground shone, / The wave upon the beach shone, / The deer of the steep hill shone, / The cock on the rafter shone – / A rafter under the wrong cock.”

The best way to make sense of this is to look at volume one of “*Carmina Gadelica*”, page 132, where Alexander Carmichael presents a *rann* that he got from Angus Gunn at North Dell in Ness. Many of the words are similar.

*Shoillsich frith dha, shoillsich fonn dha,  
 Nuall nan tonn le fonn nan tragh,  
 Ag innse dhuinne gun d' rugadh Criosda . . .*

Carmichael translates: “The mountains glowed to Him, the plains glowed to Him, / The voice of the waves with the song of the strand, / Announcing to us that Christ is born . . .”

The next verse shows “earth and sphere” (*ce is cruinne*) lit up in the same way and brings in God (who opens a door to make this happen), Mary, and Christ (who is *Oradh Ghreine shleibh is mhonaidh*, “Golden Sun of hill and mountain”). These are clearly the *Triùir* (“Three”) of the Tolsta version.

That's a “Christmas” element lodged in a “New Year” rhyme. It seems to me that the maker of the Tolsta version picked up the *shoillsich* theme and ran with it, moving gradually indoors from landscape to deer to cock.

Perhaps the Glenmoriston rhyme can help us here. Remember how the lads struck the rafter with their buckskin? They were looking for something, and there's a *rann Callainn* in which *coileach dubh an t-sunnda* (“the blackcock of joy”) denotes whisky. “The wrong cock” is a bottle of the hard stuff, hidden away from gaugers where the chickens roost on the rafter.

In the search for *bliadhn' ùr* it would be misleading not to mention Carmichael's “Beannachadh Bliadhna Uir – The Blessing of the New Year”. It begins:

*Dhe, beannaich dhomh an la ur,*

*Nach do thuradh dhomh roimhe riamh;  
Is ann gu beannachadh do ghnuis,  
Thug thu 'n uine seo dhomh, a Dhia.*

He translates: “God, bless to me the new day, / Never vouchsafed to me before; / It is to bless Thine own presence / Thou hast given me this time, O God.” The other eight lines simply complete the prayer – God bless the speaker’s eye, heart, wife, children, cattle, neighbour.

I think this is crucial to understanding the Christian approach to the New Year. The word *bliadhna* is nowhere mentioned. God is merely asked to bless the day. The second line describes the day using the verb *tùr* which Dwelly defines as “devise, invent, contrive, frame”. This shows that the day is not seen as a festival which has already occurred many times in the speaker’s lifetime, but as a unique gift.

Then look at the fourth line. What *ùine* (“period of time”) has God given the speaker? Is it the year to come? Or the speaker’s life down to this point?

Judge for yourself. My own view is that this is in origin a morning prayer to be said on any day at all, but that when the Reformers arrived with their scripture-based piety, people took to saying it on New Year’s Day only. Carmichael, who got it from Ann Morrison, *née* Ross, from Skye, a mason’s wife at Trumsgearry in North Uist, says: “This poem was repeated the first thing on the first day of the year. It was common throughout the Highlands and Islands. The writer has heard versions of it in many places.”

Let me try to sum up the fifty or so *rannan Callainn* which I’ve read or heard. In the best-remembered one, a Hogmanay lad (*gille Callainn*) describes going round the walls, banging them with a shinty-stick, and bringing his *caisean uchd* or sheep’s breast-strip into the house to be singed in the fire and sniffed for good luck. Then he appeals to the housewife for food and drink.

This supplies the basic ingredients – guisers, rituals, house, family, women, food, drink. Other rhymes emphasise certain of these elements. The house and its furnishings may be blessed in detail. Individuals may be named, with allusions to their hospitality. The man of the house may try to turn the guisers away, but his wife tells them to come in. Food and drink may be described, with reference to the guisers’ likes and dislikes. One rhyme expresses the need for good teeth to eat with!

There’s a bright side and a dark side. The bright side is supplied by Christmas elements. The dark side is hunger and chaos. Drink is to the fore. The guisers may be strangers with ulterior motives. They may threaten, bully and curse their victims. There’s noise and violence, including violence against women.

Some elements, like the *caisean uchd*, are unique to the Highlands, but if we set the whole thing in the context of midwinter traditions worldwide, we can learn something. Firstly, festive misrule – permitted chaos – was normal everywhere at this time of year, not least in the medieval church.

Secondly, in the Lowlands at New Year a festive play was performed, full of sex and violence, called the Galoshins – “Clogs”? It was abolished at the Reformation and reinvented long afterwards, so its words aren’t ancient, though its themes probably are.

It seems to me quite probable that our *rannan Callainn* preserve the essence of the pre-Reformation Galoshins and were once found all over Scotland.

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