

The year of leaping

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE date on this newspaper is 29 February 2008. Chances are that's when you're reading these words. It's called an "intercalary day", because it comes between calendars. In origin it's not an extra day *within* the calendar, but one that isn't part of any calendar at all.

So you shouldn't really be working, because today doesn't exist. You've been conned. The powers that be have decided that today is *not* a nameless extra twenty-four hours between Thursday and Friday when we can all catch up on our sleep. They want us to get on with it and call it Friday. Similarly in Germany the word for a leap year is *Schaltjahr*, from *schalten*, "to direct or govern".

Intercalary days are as old as the hills. The ancient Greeks were always messing about with them, and their calendars were chaotic.

There's some argument as to how the English language developed the term "leap year". It's certainly from "leap" meaning "jump", but why? The "Oxford English Dictionary" (OED) says it "may refer to the fact that in the bissextile year any fixed festival after February falls on the next week-day but one to that on which it fell in the preceding year, not on the next day as usual".

A bissextile year is a leap year, from the fact that in the old Julian Calendar (introduced by Julius Caesar) the sixth day before the kalends of March (24 February) was doubled. What the OED means is that if your birthday is on a Monday one year, it will normally be on a Tuesday next year, but if it falls in the months following 29 February it will "leap" an extra day to Wednesday.

That seems a bit contrived to me, though I agree that in the long middle ages the day of the week on which a church festival or an annual market fell could be quite important. People needed to be aware, for example, that if their town had a fair in the name of a particular saint, even though in 1607 it was on a Friday it would probably fall in 1608 on a Sunday – with all the complications that that could entail, depending on legislation, customs and attitudes.

Personally I think a "leap year" is so called because when you go back to remote times and places, people regarded that extra day as a chasm between two years or calendars, an unlucky, dangerous black hole which required a leap of faith if you were to get over it unscathed.

We have to bear in mind that the reason why the intercalary day falls at the end of February is because under European regimes from Julius Caesar's onwards, that was New Year. Until not long ago, when every secondary schoolboy learned Latin, September, October, November and December were often written VIIber, VIIIber, IXber and Xber, which of course is their literal meaning.

To be precise, in most countries the New Year started on 25 March, the Annunciation, but it was felt that intercalary days should fall between months, not within them. In Scotland the New Year was 25 March until 1599. In England and Ireland it was 25 March until 1751. In France and the rest of continental Europe there were different regional practices – the year might start on Christmas Day, 1 January, Easter Eve or 25 March, depending on which diocese you lived in. Most countries, even Protestant ones, had adopted 1 January as their New Year by 1700 or so. England and Tuscany were among the last to switch.

The Gaelic for a leap year is *bliadhna leuma*: "year of leaping". No surprises there. I can think off-hand of only two references to leap years or intercalary days in Gaelic literature, and they both substantiate the points I've been making.

The first is a magnificent song by the Clanranald poet Iain Dubh mac Iain mhic Ailein, who lived mostly in Eigg. I thrill to its sound. It used to be sung with tremendous verve by my late friend the Rev. William Matheson and in my mind's eye I can still see his lip quivering as the glorious words flowed out. It begins:

*Bliadhna leuma d'ar milleadh,
An cóig deug 's am mìl' eile
'S na seachd ceud a rinn imeachd,
Chaill sinn ùr-ros ar fine —
Is geur a leus air ar cinneadh r'am beò,*

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“A leap year to ruin us, the fifteen, the other thousand and the seven hundred now gone by, we lost the fresh rose of our kindred – its blister will torture our kin all their lives, its blister will torture our kin all their lives.”

The poet is telling us, rather curiously, that one thousand, seven hundred and fifteen years of the Christian era have now gone by. He seems on the face of it to be describing 1715 as a leap year, and this makes sense if the intercalary day is added between 1715 and 1716, that is, not as 29 February but as 32 December – a change implied, though I believe not stated, by that Scottish legislation of 1599 which switched New Year from 25 March to 1 January.

The “fresh rose of our kindred” is Ailean Dearg, the highly accomplished and well-loved chief of Clanranald. He had risen with his men for the Jacobite cause, but was wounded at the horrible battle of Sheriffmuir on 13 November 1715. He was taken to Drummond Castle, where he died next day, and was buried at Innerpefferay near Crieff. His monument is the gaunt ruin of his own castle, his pride and joy, Ormacleit in South Uist, which burned down accidentally after he sailed away with his army, and has never been rebuilt.

So far we can say that the poet seems to blame the “year of leaping” for his people’s misfortunes, as if there were something inherently dangerous, unnatural or unlucky about such years. There follow seven verses on the dead chief, all wonderfully well done, like this: “A courtier strong-willed, heroic, civil, sportive, sagacious, who knew all countries’ customs and all kingdoms’ fashions – tongue of honey to tell every tale, tongue of honey to tell every tale.”

In the ninth verse Iain turns to the plight of his kindred. “The horror has swamped us, this blast that came from the north on us – our cables have parted, our coastland’s been swept and we are like puny pups in a litter, like puny pups in a litter.” The north wind is a metaphor for all that’s cold and merciless.

In verse twelve Iain throws in a couple of dating clues, albeit confusing ones. “Our winter is miserable (*is neo-shubhach*), our descent on the Lowlands was not a gain but a loss to us – we’re now like a body that’s headless (*mar cholainn gun cheann sinn*) since Ronald left us in summer, since Ronald left us in summer.”

Colann gun Cheann was a celebrated monster in Morar, and Iain was a Morar MacDonald. Ronald (*Raghnaidh*) was Allan’s brother and heir, who fled to France in the early summer of 1716. Either “winter” is metaphorical, or the song was not made, or completed, till the end of 1716.

Clearly this reopens the question of whether Iain Dubh saw the leap year as 1715 or 1716. But the song is so polished, so perfect, that I don’t think any of what we have exists by accident. (You can read it for yourself in my book “An Lasair”.) It seems to me that it states Iain’s views at the end of 1716, and that he’s telling us the leap year is 1715.

There are three more verses. Allan is called “well educated” (*air dheagh oilein*), he’s said to practise *rioghalachd* (“royal ways”), and he’s addressed as *Fhir a leanadh an fhéist mar bu chòir*: “Man who practised (literally “followed”) the feast as was right.”

This comes close to evoking the *bliadhna leuma* theme. What was the correct intercalary day – 32 December or 29 February? In all the places where Ailean Dearg ruled as king, he was the man who had to decide.

I’ve been encouraged towards that view by my other example. Eighty-four years later, at New Year 1800, an avalanche killed five men sheltering in a mountain bothy in Badenoch. An elderly blacksmith and kirk elder, Duncan MacKay or Davidson (*Donnchadh Gobha*), made a song on the disaster which began:

*An Nollaig mu dheireadh den cheud
Cha chuir mi an àireamh nam mìos,
Guma h-anmoch a thig i a-rithis –
Bu ghriomach a’ bhean-taighe i.*

“The last Hogmanay of the century I’ll not include in the count of the months, may it be long before it returns – what a grim housekeeper it was.”

This is clearly about intercalation. Duncan seems to be referring to the choice offered by the two great calendars. The modern Gregorian Calendar, introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, was legalised for the United Kingdom by that same Act of Parliament in 1751, but was still not fully adhered to in the Highlands and Islands even in the early twentieth century.

In the good old simple Julian Calendar, which Duncan (born about 1731) would certainly have preferred, 1800 was a leap year containing 366 days. Pope Gregory, however, had ruled that with the exception of 1600, 2000, 2400 and so on, the centurial years would *not* be bissextile. This little adjustment provided a perfect match to the solar year.

So, assuming the song was made in January 1800, I think what Duncan is saying is that when dating the accounts for his smithy he is proposing to eliminate 31 December 1799 in preference to 29 February 1800 – which means that come 1 March he will be back in line with the law.

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