

Landlords who called themselves saints

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN THIS article I will discuss some of the traps and pitfalls that history has prepared for the innocent inquirer who would like to try and understand the names of traditional Scottish fairs. I will start with four straightforward cases of things which are not what they seem. I will go on to two names, Semvies Fair and Breag Fair, which disguise the names of saints. Finally I will present what I think is a pretty remarkable catalogue of saints' days which are not named after saints at all but (mainly) puffed-up seventeenth-century Presbyterian grandees and their families who had the gall to strut around masquerading as saints.

First, then, four kinds of trap for the unwary.

A major source for this subject is the 'Acts of the Parliament of Scotland' — APS for short. This does not mean that one has to burrow among piles of dusty scrolls. APS were published in the nineteenth century as a well-indexed series of stout volumes; what is more, Marwick's 'List of Markets and Fairs in Scotland' of 1890 cites a lot of the information on fairs that they contain.

But even Acts of Parliament — should that read 'especially Acts of Parliament'? — are fallible. An Act of the year 1641 refers to St Andrew's Day held at Inveraray every 16 May. This is a copyist's error, what we would nowadays call a typing mistake. Whoever heard of St Andrew's Day being held in May? The saint venerated at Inveraray (and Barra) on 16 May was a Gaelic one that no Parliament House scribe had ever heard of — St Brendan the Navigator, said to have discovered America in his skin-covered boat. The name in front of the scribe was Brandane, not Andrew.

A fair used to be held every year at Dunblane on 1 March. It was called St Monance Fair. Now that is fine. March 1 is indeed the day of St Monan, who gave his name to St Monance in Fife, where his fair was held on 1 March — a very important fair, too, for according to a charter of 1596 it continued for eight days. St Monan was identified by Professor Watson with Móenu, whose name in the genitive case was Móenenn, later Maonann, and who was a bishop and abbot of Clonfert in Ireland and died in 572.

So far so good. The trouble is that, as APS reveal, St Monance Fair at Dunblane, for all its ancient credentials, turns out to have been the invention of one of the first of our long list of enterprising landlords. An Act of 1669 tells of "a new fair granted to Lieut.-General William Drummond and his heirs, to be held on 1st March yearly, and called St Monance fair". Drummond clearly wanted a fair on his land on 1 March for economic reasons — it is, or was, a profitable time of year for markets, the start of spring labour. King Charles was on the throne, however, and the old saints were still in fashion. So St Monance Fair at Dunblane is not evidence for an ancient cult of St Monan in that particular place. It is a new fair with an old name.

On to 1780 now, and the town council of Lauder in the Borders abolishes 'Maitland Fair'. Now this looks very straightforward. The Maitland family were the local magnates, Earls and Dukes of Lauderdale, kings of the valley. The Maitland of the 1660s and 1670s was Charles II's Secretary of State for Scotland, as powerful as the spring tide and as corrupt as a barrel of brown apples. Kilbirnie in Ayrshire had Crawford's Day, so why should Lauder not have Maitland's Day?

Well, Maitland Fair is not what it seems but a genuine religious festival. In an Act of 1641, Parliament had granted Lauder a fair for eight days to commence on 'St Magdalen's Day', 22 July. This is the day of St Mary Magdalen, often called simply the Magdalen, to whom the risen Christ appeared. The Lauder fair may well have been held then since the Middle Ages, but it seems that with the rise of the Maitlands and of Presbyterianism, Magdalen Day had turned into Maitland Day by a process of natural evolution.

Finally, Marwick tells us that in 1890 the isle of Coll had two annual markets, held on the Tuesday before the Mull fairs in the middle of May and October. The 'New Statistical Account' of 1845 confirms that fairs were held in Coll in May, August and October "solely for the sale of black cattle". Information of this kind — no early references, no fancy name, no precise date, purpose specific — usually seems to indicate something recent. But Marwick rivets us with the words, "held here from time immemorial", and we then remember the deep, deep roots of *an Fhaidhir Mhuileach*, the Mull Fair, at *Druim Taigh Àrais*, the mossy ridge above Aros Castle. So once again we have a fair that is older than it looks.

Now for two more fairs which, like Maitland Fair, disguise the names of genuine saints. Around 1890 an 80-year-old native of Kippen in Stirlingshire remembered 'Semvies Fair' being held there on the second Wednesday of October, Old Style. This is clearly an abbreviation of 'St Mo Bhì', about whom W J Watson had something to say in his 'Celtic Place-Names of Scotland'. A saint named *Da Bhì*, 'your Bì', he points out, is commemorated in various places called *Cill Da Bhì* (Kildavie) in Mull, in Kintyre, at Flodigarry in Skye, and at Stix (*na Stuiceannan*) near Taymouth in Perthshire. *Cill Da Bhì* at Stix has a graveyard, while just a few miles away, at Morenish on Loch Tay, is *Cladh Da Bhì*, 'Your Bì's Cemetery'.

The name *Da Bhì*, says Watson, is a variant of *Mo Bhì* or of *Mo Bhiu*. "Two saints of the former name are among the twelve apostles of Ireland, Mo-Bhì mac Natfraich and Mo-Bhì mac Beoain, styled *Clàrenech*, 'flat-faced', otherwise called Berchan, Oct. 12." Since Semvies Fair at Kippen was held on the second Wednesday of October, Semvie's identity is placed beyond doubt.

Next, Breag Fair. Tarland in Aberdeenshire had a Breag Fair at Martinmas (around 11 November). By 1890 it was on 22 November, if a Tuesday; if not, it was on the Tuesday and Wednesday following. The Aberdeen Almanack of 1665 lists a 'Bryak Fair' at 16 November, but assigns it to no particular place. The November date makes it clear that this is not St Briec, Brioc or Broc of April 29/30 and 1 May, the patron of Rothesay, but it may well be St Brice, Martin's successor as Bishop of Tours.

The 'Penguin Dictionary of Saints' gives this Brice at 13 November and adds, "Perhaps his early association with St Martin partly accounts for the reverence afterwards paid to Brice's memory: his name appears in many early English church calendars, and it still figures in the calendar of the Book of Common Prayer, in a Latin form,

Britius.” The same dedication occurs in Inchbrayoch, an island in the South Esk, just below Montrose, so it must be an east-coast cult.

A fair which *might* contain the name of a saint is Skittan Market. During the years 1845-90, at least, it was held at Kilmster (Kilminster) in the parish of Wick on the first Tuesday of March. Perhaps the name is Norse, perhaps the ‘S’ is for Saint just as it is in Semvie. If any reader can enlighten me I’d be delighted to know.

Now for those landlords masquerading as saints. The whole thing may have started as a misunderstanding, really. For many years Cromarty had a St Norman’s Market, even though everybody knew (I think) that there had never been a St Norman. A charter of 1593 confirmed one of the two yearly fairs in Cromarty as St Norman’s Market, beginning 8 March and lasting five days. It is pretty certain that it was held directly beneath the walls of the old castle of Cromarty, in the gorge of a deep wooded ravine, and it seems that in St Norman’s Market we have an institution which began when a Norman could confer his patronage and protection from his mote-castle above.

The Norman in question would have been William de Monte Alto, who by 1264 had become first Sheriff of Cromarty and keeper of the royal castle. His father, Michael, was Sheriff of Inverness. Their name became Montealt, then Mohaut, then Mowat.

Thus was Scotland colonised, for the Normans had a system. When they had built the royal castle they founded the royal burgh. When they had built the burgh they founded the annual fair. A fair must have a saint, and so ‘the Norman’s market’ became St Norman’s.

The beginnings of landlordly vanity in the matter of fairs can be found in 1609, when a charter was granted by George Archbishop of St Andrews to George Lauder of Ban, granting a yearly eight-day fair at Leven in Fife to be held on — you’ve guessed it — 23 April, St George’s Day. As long as Episcopalianism remained strong the old names retained their power, and it is worth noting that when a fair at Selkirk was shifted in 1641 from 8 December to 4 July, “chiefly on account of the swelling of the rivers in December preventing the transport of goods”, the new date was given its correct traditional name, St Martin of Bullion’s Fair.

It was in the corrupt era of Lauderdale — a Presbyterian who served an Episcopalian king — that the blasphemous new names crept in. In 1670 Sir George Monro got a charter authorising him to hold two yearly fairs at Culrain in Ross-shire, one to begin on 20 June to be called Monro’s Fair, the other to begin on 24 September to be called St George’s Fair!

In 1681 James and David Bethoune of Balfour got an Act of Parliament allowing them to have two free annual fairs at Kennoway in Fife, each for two days — on 2 March, called St David’s Fair, and on 24 September, called St Mary’s Fair. The first is only a day off St David of Wales, but the second is entirely spurious, and may be the first instance of a man naming a fair after (presumably) his wife.

By the 1690s Lauderdale was gone, but so was King Charles; Presbyterianism was firmly entrenched as the state religion, and saints could be mocked with impunity. In 1693 Sir George MacKenzie of Coull got an Act of Parliament authorising him to change a free fair belonging to him from the first to the third Wednesday of October and to call it Janet Fair. At the same time he got permission to change another free fair from the first to the third Wednesday of January and call it St John’s Fair, so we must suspect that Janet and John were relatives of his own. (Unless, of course, he had in mind St John the Almsgiver, 23 January, the original patron saint of the Order of St John at Jerusalem, later the Knights of Malta. But I doubt it.)

So it goes on. Also in 1693, Parliament authorised Sir Ludovick Grant to hold a free fair to be called Louis Fair after himself, to be held at the church of Kilmore in Urquhart on the last Tuesday of August in each year, and another, to be called Lady Fair in honour of his wife, to be held yearly in November at the same place.

Lowland landlords were more blatant. In 1695 Thomas Forbes of Waterton was authorised to have four free fairs at Ellon, each for three days: on the first Tuesday of June, to be called St John’s Fair; on the first Tuesday of July, to be called St Jean’s Fair; on the first Tuesday of November, to be called St Thomas’ Fair; and on the first Tuesday of December, to be called St Elizabeth’s Fair. His neighbour William Gordon showed a little more taste. He got permission to have four free fairs at Huntly, each for three days: on the last Tuesday of February, to be called Huntly Fair; on the second Tuesday of May, to be called May Fair; on the second Tuesday of September, to be called Charles Fair; and on the second Tuesday of October, to be called the Marquis Fair.

The last of these in-the-family canonisations appears to have taken place in 1705, still in Aberdeenshire, when Sir Samuel Forbes of Foveran got an Act of Parliament allowing him to have two yearly fairs at Swanfoord — on 1 July, to be called St Margaret’s Fair, and on the first Thursday of November, to be called William’s Fair. There were saints of this name, but not at the dates given.

After this, it becomes pretty easy to see through ‘St Jonah’. In 1669 Parliament authorised Adam Urquhart of Meldrum to hold a three-day fair at Old Meldrum in Aberdeenshire on the third Tuesday of May to be called St Jonah’s Fair, and a subsequent charter of 1671 authorised a three-day fair there on the last Tuesday of May to be called St Jonas Fair. The only Jonah given in the ‘Penguin Dictionary of Saints’ is an obscure Persian martyr Jonah or Jonas whose day is 29 March.

It is much more likely that Adam was thinking of someone like his Uncle Jonah.

— WHFP 12.5.95