

THE VOCABULARY OF THE KIRK

Part I

The Presbyterian Year

A recent revision of the text of the *Scottish National Dictionary* tended to confirm the impression of the considerable proportion of the Scots vocabulary which can be ascribed, directly or indirectly, to Church usage. The article *Kirk* itself extends to five pages and is one of the longest in the whole work, and although the period covered by the Dictionary begins at 1700 there is plenty of evidence to show how pre-Reformation habits and even terminology percolated through the troubled seventeenth century and have survived, largely in a secularized form, to this day.

It is a truism to say how frequently the Church took over the old pagan festivals and adapted them to Christian ritual and interpretation. The reverse process has taken place in Presbyterian Scotland, although of course during the last two generations, Christmas and Easter have gradually resumed their religious significance, partly through anglicizing, or, dare one say, anglicanizing influence.

The word 'mass' naturally was banished by Knox (and Jenny Geddes), though in Ayrshire, of all places, a large room or building might be described by the simile 'big eneuch to say a mass in'. And yet as the second element in many compound words it is in practically everyday secular use. The four Scottish term-days are still Candlemas (from the altar candles consecrated at the Purification of the Virgin and the presentation of the infant Christ as the light to the Gentiles), Whitsunday, Lammas (the 'Loaf-Mass', to bless the first bread from the harvest) and Martinmas, the second and fourth, linked as they are with the seasonal work on a farm, being the most important for the payment of rents and the beginnings and endings of leases. But the third survives in banking under the expression borrowed from England, of the August Bank holiday; and the first has had a long connection with education, from the second term of the University year to the older practice of paying the local schoolmaster his annual fee. Michaelmas was taken over by the fore-runners of the County Councils as the day on which they met to fix the County rates and revise the electoral rolls.

Naturally the Saints' masses had a specially close connection with the particular localities dedicated to them and the holiday (in the original and literal sense of the word) was not infrequently the occasion of a fair or merrymaking which may still be celebrated.

The national saint's day is of course generally observed though no longer under its old name of *Andersmas*; *Marymas* is a race-day and fair at Irvine; there was *Maunsemas* in honour of St. Magnus in Orkney and Shetland; Caithness celebrated the day of the Invention of the Cross as Rood day 'in barlan', i.e. at the barley sowing at the beginning of May and some of the superstitions of the contemporary pagan festival of Beltane got mixed up with the religious observances, in the attempt to placate the spirits of faery and witchcraft. It was for instance unlucky to go to sea on Rood day in the Mearns. It had also educational significance in the North-East, when pupils were enrolled for the summer term and at Lammass for the winter term, as at Aberdeen Grammar School. The day of the Exaltation of the Cross in September was Rood day 'in hairst' and was particularly observed with fairs in Dumfries. Local saints' days are St. Ronan's at Innerleithen, Tenants (St. Inan's) Day at Beith; saints' fairs, while fairs were still in fashion, were often very important and protracted occasions, as Summereve (St. Maol Rubha) Fair at Keith in September, and also at Forres, Portree, and Pitlessie, the last famous through Wilkie's painting, Lowrin Fair for St. Laurence at Rayne, Paldy Fair (St. Palladius) at Fordoun, and Polnar Fair (St. Apollinaris) at Inverurie; a rather obscure Spanish saint, St. Lilliosa, turns up in Liliass Day in Kilbarchan, which had, for Scotland, an unusual flower festival at the end of July. One could extend the list almost endlessly; sufficient to say, that the Saints, though banished from the ecclesiastical calendar, continued to play a prominent role in the secular one throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and well into the twentieth until the wars came and the technological revolution and the old agricultural way of life changed practically out of recognition.

Three other Church festivals maintained a lively existence during the same period, first, Shrove Tuesday, known in Scotland as *Fastern's Een*, from the Anglo-Saxon form signifying the vigil of the fasting (of Lent), when the Scots, like the English, indulged in rich eating, pancakes, beef brose, and so on, to fortify themselves for the more spartan fare of subsequent weeks. The local schoolmasters did particularly well by holding an annual main of fighting cocks provided by their pupils and appropriating the dead, disabled or runaway birds for their own consumption, a practice alluded to by Andrew Fairservice in *Rob Roy*. And above all it was the day for football, especially in the Border towns where, in a more or less free-for-all rugby form, it is still an annual event.

The second was *Skire Thursday* (Maundy Day) where at the end of Lent, curious rites of feeding the land and sea with porridge to ensure fertility were practiced, especially in the Highlands.

And the third was the greatest of them all where the Church came

completely to terms with paganism as the storms and scarcities and darkness of winter approached and the powers of darkness had to be conciliated at all costs. So the festival of All Saints is ushered in with a complicated ritual of purificatory fire, of divination, charms, guising and magic of all kinds, in the Scottish *Halloween*, which the Kirk strove in vain to suppress.

As for the two main Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas it is significant that these two names are reborrowings from English and that the popular names in Scotland were *Pace* from *pascha* and *Yule* from the Old Norse winter feast of *jól*, and where these have survived, as in the North-East of Scotland, it is almost always in a non-ecclesiastical context, as *Pace-egg*, *Pace-yaud* (someone who has no new clothes to wear at Easter), *Yule's yaud* (one in a similar condition at Christmas), and in *Yule's girth*, the medieval moratorium on criminal prosecutions during Christmas, which survived until recently in the expression 'Ye're brakkin Yule's gird', used to cajole a child that had shed tears in the midst of the seasonal rejoicing.

The Reformation drastically reduced the number of Sacraments from seven to two and of baptism there is not much to say except to record the practice of presenting a small packet of food, a *kirstenin bit*, usually bread and cheese, to the first person met with in the street when a christening party is on its way with the infant to the ceremony. With Communion it is very much otherwise. The First Book of Discipline recommends four times in the year, preferably in March, June, September and December, but avoiding the old popish holidays of Easter and Christmas, but within living memory it was usually twice and earlier it could be even less frequent. Probably because of this infrequency, again partly due to agricultural reasons, when the population had its rare breaks from labour at the Whitsunday and Martinmas terms, Communion grew in importance and solemnity. It was 'The Occasion' *par excellence*, and old people are still heard using the term. Officially it is 'The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper', 'Holy Communion' being an innovation smacking of 'High Presbyterianism', as a knowledgeable reader might infer for himself by a study of the church notices in the newspapers. Locally it used to be called 'Muckle Sunday'.

The opportunity of having so many of their congregation together at one time was not all that common, and the Kirk certainly made the most of it. The order of procedure was the preparation of the communicants first by an *examine*, an examination of the parishioners on the state of their consciences and their religious knowledge, whence those who were potentially eligible for receiving communion were called *examinable persons*, roughly speaking all the adults in a parish, irrespective of whether they were attached to the Church of Scotland, the seceding bodies, or even the Episcopalians and Roman

Catholics. No doubt some who were found to be unsound in belief or behaviour would be eliminated at this stage. The next item was the *preparation* or *preparatory service* held on the Saturday or, more recently, the Friday preceding, when the minister preached an exhortatory sermon to prepare his flock for the solemnity of the coming Sunday and some see in this a survival of the Catholic exhortation before the Mass.

Most parishes, however, from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards were not content with this and preceded the preparation with a *Fast Day* on the Wednesday or sometimes the Thursday, when the serious-minded imposed abstinence on themselves, and dedicated themselves to various religious exercises. In the circumstances work was given up for the day. This naturally led to a general holiday which gradually assumed its modern aspect with jaunts and jollifications of all kinds, and, in the heyday of the railways, cheap excursions and the like, though in the Highlands the more austere observation went on as before.

When the day arrived and the service was under way, the Communion was preceded by the *action sermon*, the 'action' being the celebration itself. This finished, came yet another exhortation, the last in the process of excluding the unworthy, the famous *debars* when the officiating minister *fenced the tables*, or held off from the table with the words 'I debar' those who had been guilty of a list of sins and backslidings which he proceeded to enumerate severally, so that those who had been found out or whose consciences smote them might think again before partaking. A fine point arose when the minister came to consecrate the elements, and raised the vessels in his hands during his prayer. The Seceders were somewhat dubious about this and those with long noses for popery suspecting it, no doubt correctly, as having some derivation from the Roman practice of elevating the Host, created a furore in Ayrshire in the 1760s, so that the Seceders were split into *lifters* and *non-lifters*. The controversy is not quite dead yet.

While the *services*, the distribution of the elements from the *stowps* and the *trenchers* by the elders, were going on at the several *tables*, where the communicants took their seats inside the church, their metal *tokens* frequently having the number of the table allocated to each stamped on the back, many would have to wait their turn at large 'occasions' and assisting ministers would improve the waiting time by preaching from a *tent*, a kind of little sentry-box, in the open air, a practice well described by Burns in 'The Holy Fair'. This preaching marathon was not even then finished as in many places yet another sermon was delivered on the following Monday, *preaching Monday*, or sometimes *Muckle Monanday*, which was the forerunner of the modern thanksgiving service. A feature of this sermon, often

called the *pirlicue*, was the summary of the previous sermons delivered at the occasion. That these occasions lasted sometimes six days is a measure of their importance in the life of the community, and they certainly made up for their infrequency when they did actually take place.

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(*To be continued*)