

Festival Days

Maxwell's Old Dundee Prior to the Reformation

Although Presbyterian Scotland has, in effect, lost all record of the festival days of the Old Church, the memory of some of them is recalled by the yet lingering primitive customs with which they have been long associated; and even, it may be, by a faint unacknowledged feeling of regard for their ancient sanctity.

We do not now, as our forefathers did, fix one of them for the fulfilment of important stipulations, but we still enter upon the possession and occupation of property, and pay rents in the saint's days, which from of old, have been the terms.

Yule recalls a great event by a genial season of good will and general rejoicing, and Pasche, the completion of a grand work by a peaceful time among emblems of pastoral simplicity; All Hallow Eve bring to us many gruesome folk stories, not unmixed with pleasant fairy fancies, and Andromas, a time of national reminiscences and patriotic aspirations.

Shrove-tide, called in Scotland Fasten or Fastren's Even – the eve of the fast – the last day of the feast and carnival which immediately precedes the solemnities of Lent, continued, long after the Reformation had put an end to the observances of the season, to keep hold of the popular mind; and to be reckoned the appropriate time for such friendly social gatherings of simple folk as that which Burns describes: -

"On Fasten E'en we had a rocking;
To ca' the crack and weave the stocking."

Another of these long-honoured festivals was Mid-Lentron, likewise called Car Sunday, by both of which designations I find it in the records. In England, the day obtained the name of Mothering Sunday, on account of the beautiful old custom observed by young men and maidens who lived away from home, of then visiting their mothers, carrying with them presents, usually of simmel cakes – a practice which became known as "Going-a-Mothering." In Scotland, these filial offerings were called carlins or car-cakes – a dainty formed into a kind of pancakes, flavoured with well-spiced condiments – and these gave the popular name to the holiday. Semple, in his humorous song, "The Blythsome Bridal," includes them among the attractions of the marriage festivities –

"The lads and lasses in pearlins
Will feast in the heart o' the ha',
On Synbows and reefarts and carlins,
That are baith sodden and raw."

Car-cakes are not yet forgotten along the Braes of Angus; for there, under the same name, and in dimly recognised connection with the season of Lent, they continue to be prepared on the preceding Fastren's Even. They, however are not now made the occasion of such simple and pious family pilgrimages as those with which they were associated in early times.

The days assigned to the honour of the Virgin – the patron saint of the burgh, and to whom the church was dedicated – were reckoned special festivals, and on them the annual fairs – the great holidays of the people, and the main market days of the merchants – were held.

The principal day of "the first fair, callit The Assumption Day of Our Lady" or "Mariemes," was on August 15th, which, by change of style, became the 26th; and on this day continues to be held.

The people of Scotland long ago forgot, or confused the several saint's days in the calendar, and this popular festival, disassociated from religious observance, became known in Dundee burghal writings as "The Lady Mary Fair" – evidently a corruption of "Our Lady" and ST. Mary" – and in the course of time, the designation has popularly connected the old holiday with the name of some mythical patrician dame.

A similar, and, perhaps, more curious corruption has, in the course of three centuries, crept into the town chamberlain's books; where one of the few pre-reformation annuals which yet continue to be paid, has, in modern times been regularly entered as "The Altarage dues of saint Mary the Queen!" the latter or "Letter Fair callit the Nativity day of Our Lady" – a festival also known in Scotland as "Letter Mary day" – was on September 8th, by the change of style the 19th, and on this day the fair is yet observed.

When St. Mary's church attained its utmost splendour, the magnificent ritualistic services that were held within its walls, must have proved a source of great attraction to worshipers, as well as an incentive to their zeal. It had been to serve the same purpose, and

to associate the people with the church, that they were encouraged to take part in the great pen air spectacles, which at certain seasons were presented.

The Corpus Christi procession, as it was exhibited toward the end of the fifteenth century, had, probably, been one of the most popular of these.

From an inventory which has been preserved of the dresses and curious trappings used in it, as they were handed to one of St. Mary's priests for preservation, we may judge what the nature of its attractions was: -

"The Grayth of the procession of Corpus Christi, deliverit to Sir Thomas Barbour: - In primis, iijxx of crownis, vij pair of angel veynis; iij myteris; Cristis cott of lethyr, with the hosse and gluffis; Christos hed; xxxj suerdis; three lang corssis of tre; Sanc Thomas sper; a cors til Sanc Blasis; Sanc Johnnis cott; a credil and thre barnis made of claith; xx hedis if hayr. The four Evangellistis; Sanc Katrinis quheil. Sanc Androwis cros; a saw, a ax, a rassour, a guly knyff; a worm of tre; the haly lam of tre; Sanc Barbill castel; Abraamis hat and thre hedis of hayr."

The cost of these shows had probably been borne by some of the burgesses. On one occasion when a dispute arose regarding the payment of a contract for the supply of properties. It is enacted "anent the claim of twenty-six masks of drass bygane, and all the masks till Mid Lentrone next to come, for sixteen pence the mask, pursuit be David Gilcris on Peter Falconar, [that a day] be assignit Peter to answer."

These spectacles had, doubtless been originally exhibited in the Church itself, but latterly were presented on the Playfield. This field was that portion of the ancient Westfield, which lay on the level haugh south of the burn; its western boundary being "the green braes" that afterwards obtained the designation of "The Witches' Knowe." It was conveniently situated and well suited for the production of such shows, and for those fantastically devised revels in which our ancestors took much pleasure. The special purpose, however, to which Playfields in Scottish burghs were devoted – from which, indeed, they derived their name – was the exhibition at Whitsuntide, or other high festival, of popular Mysteries, or Miracle plays, usually founded upon scriptural subjects. These plays were very attractive, and their performance caused a great resort of people. Lindsay, who wrote some of them, in reference to this, says,

"As for this day, I have na mair to say you,
On Whitson Tysday cum see our play I pray you."

At their early production, the clergy patronised and encouraged Miracle plays as a means for promoting religious fervour, and themselves took part in the performance; but in the course of the sixteenth century, some of the plays were made to convey such satirical reproof against corruptions in the state and in the church, that they became the subject of ecclesiastical anathema.

James Wedderburn wrote several of the more trenchant of them, and these were acted upon the Playfield at the West Port with so much effect, tat he had to flee to the Continent in order to escape from the hands of irritated churchmen. During the time that his brother, Robert, was Vicar of St. Mary's church, plays continued to be performed in the usual place. This I find from an entry shortly before the Vicar's death, regarding a musical instrument: - "Elspet Knymonth is adjudgit to deliver to John Fotheringham his trumpet, whilk he lent to William, [her spouse] in time of the play at the Westfield."