

MODIFICATIONS OF THE FESTIVAL CALENDAR IN 1600 AND 1605 DURING THE REIGN OF JAMES VI AND I

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Abstract: James VI, one of the line of Stuart kings of Scotland, became king of England (as James I of that country) on the death of Queen Elizabeth of England in 1603. Two modifications to the festival calendar were introduced during his reign.

1 January became the beginning of the year in Scotland in 1600. Both Scotland and England before that time began the year at the Annunciation on 25 March. When the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1752 in the whole of Britain, England adopted the 1 January year-beginning, but no change was required in Scotland.

5 November is Guy Fawkes Day, the main festival for bonfires and fireworks throughout Britain. There were a number of points in the year traditionally celebrated with bonfires, but these have all died out as general celebrations leaving this historically founded festival as a focus for private parties and municipal festivities. The annual bonfires celebrate the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot which aimed to blow up King James and his parliament at Westminster in London on 5 November 1605. Guy Fawkes was arrested when about to set light to the gunpowder stored under the parliament building.

Keywords: bonfires, Catholics, commemoration, England, fireworks, Gunpowder Plot, Guy Fawkes Day, James VI, New Year, Scotland

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Introduction

Two high points in the festival calendar in Britain can be related to the early seventeenth century during the reign of King James VI of Scotland who became James I of England in 1603. I shall consider first the introduction in Scotland in 1600 of an official year-beginning on 1 January which had some impact on international politics at the time, and then go on to a historical incident on 4-5 November 1605 which has had repercussions at the national and local level in Britain in the religious and secular realms up to the present day through the annual commemoration on 5 November.

The Marking of the Official Beginning of the Year on 1 January

Both Scotland and England had marked the year-beginning on 25 March, the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, which was referred to as Lady Day. However, the Roman year-beginning on 1 January, which had been the occasion of pagan midwinter celebrations, had not been forgotten and the authors of a handbook on the ritual year draw attention to the situation that this gave rise to: "Partly because of these Roman customs, the Church was long reluctant to count the year from 1 January; nevertheless, the day retained the title of New Year's Day and its counterpart in other languages irrespective of the day on which the number of the year changed."¹ They note that "in Scotland the 1 January style was adopted in 1600" and that "by then it was normal in continental Western Europe outside Italy". We have the opportunity in Scotland of observing how the change was made through a simple regulation at the highest level of government.

James VI, King of the Scots, had scholarly leanings and an enquiring mind,² and he probably played a leading role personally in the adoption of the new year-beginning in his kingdom at the beginning of a new century. There may have been religious influences before this time that would have supported the change. The reformation in Scotland, which occurred in 1560, took a Calvinist form that brought about the destruction of the Church festival year.³ A year-beginning at the Annunciation might have seemed anomalous in a country that forbade the celebration of any Church festivals including Christmas and Easter. However, I have not seen this discussed, and the proclamation by King James does not include any reference to religion. It makes three points. One is that the change will harm no one. A second is rather vaguely worded but seems to imply that a year-beginning at 1 January would be natural and appropriate in the sense that it is close to the solstice and at a point when light begins to increase. The main reason given for making the change, however, is that it would bring Scotland into line with the practice of continental Europe. This is stated in terms of doing what is done in "all other well-governed commonwealths and countries", and this was rather insulting to England, which was following the 25 March practice. Politically, the move that was positive towards continental Europe in general was antagonistic towards England, the southern neighbour within the same island.

The introduction of the new year-beginning was made by the following proclamation, which gave two weeks' notice of the change. Within the following fortnight, the news was to be carried throughout the kingdom and announced at the market crosses which stood in the town centres. This "Ordinance of 17 December 1599 at Holyrood House, Edinburgh" is given from the register of the Privy Council of Scotland⁴ and the text is followed by my translation into modern English.

1 BLACKBURN and HOLFORD-STREVENIS 1999. 7, cf. 784.

2 CROFT 2003; STILMA 2012.

3 CAMERON 1972. 88-89.

4 MASSON 1884. 63.

The Kingis Majestie and Lordis of his Secreit Counsall undirstanding that in all utheris weill governit commoun welthis and cuntreyis the first day of the yeir begynis yeirlye upoun the first day of Januare, commounlie callit new yeiris day, and that this realme onlie is different fra all utheris in the compt and reckning of the yeiris; and his Majestie and Counsall willing that thair salbe na disconformitie betuix his Majestie, his realme and leigis, and utheris nichtbour cuntreyis in this particular, bot that thay sall conforme thameselffis to the ordour and custum observit be all utheris cuntreyis, especiallie seing the course and seasoun of the yeir is maist propir and ansuerabill thairto, and that the alteratioun thair of importis na hurte nor prejudice to ony partie: thairfoir his Majestie, with advise of the Lordis of his Secreit Counsall, statutis and ordanis that in all tyme cuming the first day of the yeir sal begin yeirlye upoun the first day of Januare, and thir presentis to tak executioun upoun the first day of Januare nix to cum, quhilk salbe the first day of the j^m and sex hundreth yeir of God; and thairfoir ordanis and commandis the clerkis of his Hienes sessioun and signet, the directour and writtaris to the chancellarie and prevey seall, and all utheris jugeis, writtaris, notaris, and clerkis within this realme, that thay and everie ane of thame in all tyme heirefter date all thair decreittis, infeftmentis, charteris, seasinges, letteris, and writtis quhatsumevir, according to this present ordinance, compting the first day of the yeir fra the first day of Januare nix to cum; and ordanis publicatioun to be maid heirof at the mercat croceis of the heid burrowis of this realme, quhairthrow nane pretend ignorance of the same.⁵

Clearly James and his lords had in mind only the practicalities of dating in this way, but the change probably facilitated the keeping of customary practices like divination at this time of year. The celebration of New Year's Eve, called Hogmanay, is strongly marked in Scotland at the present day.

Scotland and England differed in the matter of the year-beginning up the time of the more radical calendar revision when Great Britain adopted the Gregorian reform in 1752. As this date was after the Union of the Parliaments, which took

⁵ The King's Majesty and Lords of his Privy Council understanding that in all other well-governed commonwealths and countries the first day of the year begins yearly upon the first day of January, commonly called new year's day, and that this kingdom only is different from all others in the count and reckoning of the years; and his Majesty and Council desiring that there shall be no lack of conformity between his Majesty's kingdom and subjects, and other neighbouring countries in this particular, but that they shall conform themselves to the order and custom observed by all other countries, especially seeing the course and season of the year is most proper and appropriate, and that the alteration causes no harm to any party: therefore his Majesty, with advice of the Lords of his Privy Council, ordains that in all time coming the first day of the year shall begin yearly upon the first day of January, and these provisions to be put into effect upon the first day of next January, which shall be the first day of the one thousand and six hundredth year of God; and therefore ordains and commands the clerks of his Highness's session and signet, the director and writers to the chancellery and privy seal, and all other judges, notaries, and clerks within this kingdom, that they and every one of them in all time to come date all their decrees, investments, charters, feudal grants, letters, and writs, according to this present ordinance, counting the first day of the year from the first day of next January; and ordains proclamation to be made of this at the market crosses of the main towns of this kingdom, so that no one may claim ignorance of it.

place in 1707, the calendar legislation now applied to both England and Scotland. In the act of parliament 24 George II, c. 23, it was ordered that the eleven days 3-13 September should be omitted in 1752. Provision was also made for the reckoning of the year to run from 1 January from 1752 in England, as it had already done in Scotland since 1600, as we have seen. An intriguing point is that the 1 January year-beginning was not applied to the tax year which still runs from Old Lady Day, currently reckoned as 6 April, although this is normally understood simply as an arbitrary starting date without any sense of its history.⁶

We can now return to King James VI for the consideration of our second special date, 5 November. James succeeded to the throne of England as James I on the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603. In London, he soon became the focus of an addition to the festival calendar which celebrates the failure of an attempt at mass assassination in which he was to have played the role of principal victim.

The Commemoration of the Failure of the Gunpowder Plot on 5 November

David Cressy has explored the creation of historical celebrations in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (1989) and has paid particular attention to the Gunpowder Plot. He comments on its special place in the English ritual year,⁷ noting that “unlike new nations that celebrate their independence, or old nations that commemorate their revolutions, the English observe no national anniversary to focus and express their patriotism” and that much of the “festive energy” available for such occasions as the Fourth of July in America or the Fourteenth of July in France “has been devoted, instead, to commemorations of the Fifth of November”.

It is strange but true that a historical event of 1605 has succeeded in giving its commemorative date to a major fire festival widely celebrated throughout Britain today. There is an associated rhyme which refers to remembrance:⁸

Remember, remember, the Fifth of November,
The Gunpowder Treason and Plot.
I see no reason why Gunpowder Treason
Should ever be forgot.

The question is rather why this particular event should have been ritually remembered for over four centuries. Steve Roud comments in a recent survey of English ritual and customary practice⁹ that “the enormity and astounding audacity of the plot to assassinate the sovereign and all the ruling elite of the country in one fell swoop was bound to mark the day as significant in the history of the nation.” He notes that

6 BLACKBURN and HOLFORD-STREVENs 1999. 149, 687; POOLE 1995. 110, 117.

7 CRESSY 1992. 68.

8 CRESSY 1989. 141.

9 ROUD 2006. 334.

“the fact that the plotters were Catholics gave the deed an added dimension”, and that Parliament immediately decreed public celebrations to mark the “miraculous deliverance” which “took the normal form for that time – bell-ringing, bonfires, and special prayers and sermons.” Cressy speaks of the act of Parliament 3 James I, c.1 as “one of the earliest examples of legislated memory”,¹⁰ and notes that it decreed “public thanksgiving to Almighty God every year on the fifth day of November [so that] this unfained thankfulness may never be forgotten, but be had in perpetual remembrance”.

Bell-ringing was practised for a long time but it is now only the bonfires that survive, together with lavish firework displays. At a peak point, in 1980, it was estimated that the expenditure on fireworks was £14 million.¹¹ In recent years, the emphasis has shifted from family fireworks to public spectacles, like that in Edinburgh at Meadowbank Stadium in 2011, when the photograph included as Figure 1 was taken.

The evening of 5 November is called Firework Night or Bonfire Night. There were a number of dates traditionally celebrated by bonfires in the British Isles: the Celtic half-year markers when bonfires were lit on the days or eves of 1 May (Beltane) and 1 November (Halloween), and the solstices when bonfires were lit at Midsummer or St John’s Eve, and Midwinter or 31 December (Hogmanay).¹² The traditional bonfire celebrations largely died out, although there were exceptions like the Clavie in Burghead on 11 January, Old New Year’s Eve,¹³ and it is always possible to create revivals such as those currently held in Edinburgh on Beltane, Halloween and Hogmanay. However, by contrast with these localised activities, Bonfire Night on 5 November is celebrated today all over Britain at both the civic and private levels and the sound and flash of fireworks going off are in evidence for several nights about this date.

Fire always has its dangers as well as its excitements and there were times when subversive activities and near-riots were a feature of Bonfire Night.¹⁴ A celebration that had been established to commemorate the triumph of law and order when under threat was quite capable of turning into an occasion for chaos and licence. The survival and continued popularity of the celebration owes much to what Ronald Hutton has called “the symbolic flexibility of Gunpowder Treason Day”.¹⁵

The day is also called Guy Fawkes Day from the name of the conspirator who took the most active role. The king was due to attend the opening of Parliament on 5 November 1605 and, on the night before, when the cellars under Parliament House were searched in response to a leak about a possible danger, Guy Fawkes was found with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder and preparations to set them alight. This planned explosion was a desperate measure by a group of Catholics

10 CRESSY 1992. 71.

11 HUTTON 1996. 406.

12 SANDERSON 1980; SPROTT 1980; HUTTON 1996. 42-44, 218-225, 311-321, 366-369.

13 McKEAN 2012.

14 CRESSY 1992. 83-84; HUTTON 1996. 398-400; ROUD 2006. 334.

15 HUTTON 1994. 255-256.

disappointed in their hopes of improvement in their situation under the new ruler.¹⁶ Fawkes and other conspirators were executed and Catholic repression continued.

The Guy Fawkes Day festival practice is one of great intricacy that has been explored in some detail¹⁷ and only a very general outline can be given here. Recent reflections on the plot itself and the repercussions even today of the government response to it are to be found in a book published for the 400th anniversary.¹⁸ One writer, David Cannadine, makes a comparison with 9/11 and points out that “the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot [was] an outstandingly successful pre-emptive strike against what would now be described as the forces of organized, fanatical, religiously motivated terrorism”.¹⁹ Another, Justin Champion, comments on the annual festival that “the tenacity of the ritual in the twenty-first century is a relic of an earlier and more brutal age” and that “it is a residual act of anti-Catholic hatred”.²⁰ He adds: “Given the increasing public sensitivity about criticism and hostility towards other people’s religious belief, it is surprising that Bonfire Night persists as a supposedly collective moment of cultural commemoration.”²¹

In line with the “symbolic ambivalence of the day”,²² many people are simply out to enjoy a fireworks display or a party while some do display the anti-Catholic rancour complained of by Champion – and there may also be other targets of aggression. An effigy called a guy after Guy Fawkes is sometimes burnt on the bonfire and this may represent Guy Fawkes himself or the Pope or it may alternatively represent some unpopular political figure.²³ Historical memory can give way to current affairs.²⁴ Clearly, feelings can run high and violence can occur, and, in the light of the “increasing public sensitivity” mentioned above, we can wonder how long this aspect of the tradition will continue.

The surprising thing is that the custom has lasted for centuries through quite different political climates. The fact that both king and parliament had been in danger, meant that both royalists and parliamentarians could support the celebration of the failure of the plot.²⁵ After James’s son, Charles I, was executed in 1649, the godly government that took over was opposed in principle to festivals but Gunpowder Day was an exception and it had the distinction of being “the only legal seasonal festival during the Interregnum”.²⁶ It also continued to be celebrated during the short reign of James’s Catholic grandson, James II (1685-1688). It was part of the flexibility of the day that prayers that had been directed against Catholic treason could be revised to condemn treason in general.²⁷ Observance of

16 FRASER 1996; CROFT 2003. 161-163.

17 See, e.g., CRESSY 1989. 141-170; HUTTON 1996. 393-407; BLACKBURN and HOLFORD-STREVS 1999. 448-449; ROUD 2006. 333-341.

18 BUCHANAN 2005.

19 CANNADINE 2005. 1-2.

20 CHAMPION 2005. 80.

21 CHAMPION 2005. 89.

22 HUTTON 1996. 396.

23 ROUD 2006. 336; HANNAT 2011. 138-139.

24 CRESSY 1992. 83.

25 HUTTON 1994. 212.

26 HUTTON 1996. 395.

27 HUTTON 1996. 396.

the Fifth of November was eventually removed from the calendar of the established Church of England in 1859²⁸ and the celebration took a more exclusively secular turn.

In the twentieth century, it was especially a children's festival, with children making a guy and carrying it around asking for "a penny for the guy" and spending the money on fireworks.²⁹ This custom was more common in England than in Scotland where the children were more likely to be out a few days earlier on 31 October engaged in house-visiting in disguise in celebration of Halloween.³⁰

"Tradition" takes many forms. The beginnings of a calendar tradition like Halloween, which signals the start of the dark half of the Celtic year, have to be located in prehistory,³¹ while a tradition like that of Guy Fawkes Day can go back long before individual human memory and yet be fixed in time to a traceable source, which in this case is to be found in the history books under the reign of James VI and I.

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28 CRESSY 1992. 83.

29 CRESSY 1992. 86.

30 LYLE 2011.

31 LYLE 2009.

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Fig. 1. A firework display at Meadowbank Stadium, Edinburgh, on 4 November 2011.
(Photo: Anne Seitz)