

*'The Pope's new invention':
the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in Ireland,
1583-1782*

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A couple of years ago I was involved in the 400th anniversary of the Battle of Kinsale. The town's official commemoration took place according to the new style system of dating. The Irish and the Spaniards had fought the battle on 3 January 1602 according to the new calendar laid down by Pope Gregory XIII nineteen years previously whereas the English fought the engagement on 24 December 1601 in accordance with the old calendar which they and other Protestants continued to use.

This clash of calendars raises a neglected question about the battle of Kinsale. Did the difference in year and day affect the psychology of the two armies fighting the same battle on different dates? The trapped English army was yet to have its Christmas dinner and indeed was unlikely to have any if it did not win. On the other hand, the Irish had celebrated Christmas and New Year—maybe these celebrations made them over-confident and perhaps a bit worse for wear. Of course we will never know whether the difference in dates had a bearing on the battle of Kinsale – there are good military reasons for the Irish defeat anyhow - but it does provide a good entrée to the examination of the general impact of the Gregorian calendar in Ireland.

The old calendar had been inaugurated in 45 BC by Julius Caesar in his role as Pontifex Maximus, the pontiff or chief priest of pagan Rome. This calendar had 365 days and allowed for a leap year every four years. The year had been calculated at 365 days and 6 hours but the actual length of a year is 365 days, five hours, forty-eight minutes, forty-six seconds. Over the years this discrepancy with the Julian calendar caused a slippage of days. In the Middle Ages various proposals were made to reform the calendar, in particular because Easter was occurring later and later in the year. Nothing happened until the issue was brought up again at the great Counter-Reformation council of the church at Trent. The proposed publication of a new breviary for the Catholic church in the final session of 1562-3 was the green light for a papal commission on calendar reform established in the 1570s. This commission worked on a set of proposals originally made by an Italian physician Aloysius Lilius (1510-76). A gnomon constructed in the Vatican Palace by the astronomer Ignazio Danti had convinced Pope Gregory and others that the equinoxes were occurring on the wrong dates. Yesterday during a visit to the Secret Archives specially arranged by Philip McDonagh, our ambassador to the Holy See, and by first secretary Shane Stephens, we saw this instrument in the Tower of the Winds. It utilises a hole in a high wall to cast the light of the sun on a scale aligned along the meridian. The commission finally reported in 1580. Calculating the year at 365 days, five

hours, forty-eight minutes and twenty seconds, it proposed dropping ten days in a single year and omitting one leap year in every four hundred in order to realign the calendar. It also proposed a more accurate method of establishing the date of Easter and that the New Year should universally begin on 1 January rather than on Lady Day, the feast of the Annunciation, 25 March.



Tower of the Winds

Pope Gregory, following a period of consultation and deliberation, published the commission's proposals in the Papal Bull *Inter Gravissimas* in March 1582. The Bull decreed that the new style calendar should be inaugurated by dropping ten days at the start of October because that month had the least number of important church feasts. This change-over required the co-operation of the civil authorities to be effected. There was full co-operation in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Poland so that people going to bed on 4

October woke up on the 15th. France followed suit in December and some Catholic districts of Germany and the Netherlands even missed Christmas in making the change-over!

TABLE 19.1 *Dates on which some countries adopted the Gregorian calendar*

Country	Year	Dates omitted
Rome	1582	5-14 October
Italy	1582	5-14 October
Portugal	1582	5-14 October
Spain	1582	5-14 October
Poland	1582	5-14 October
Luxembourg	1582	15-24 December
France	1582	10-19 December
Belgium	1582 ¹	
Austria	1583 ¹	
Holland (Catholic)	1582 ²	
Holland (Protestant)	1700 ²	
Germany (Catholic)	1583 ¹	
Czechoslovakia	1584	7-16 January
Switzerland (Catholic)	1584 ¹	11-21 January
Hungary	1587	22-31 October
Germany (Protestant)	1700 ¹	19-28 February
Denmark	1700	19-28 February
Norway	1700	19-28 February
Switzerland (Protestant)	1701	1-11 January
England and colonies	1752	3-13 September
Ireland	1752	3-13 September
Scotland	1752	3-13 September
Sweden	1753 ²	
Finland	1753 ²	
Alaska	1867 ³	
Japan	1873 ^{2,4}	
Egypt	1875 ⁴	
Albania	1912	
China	1912 ^{2,4}	
Bulgaria	1915 ²	
Lithuania	1915	
Larvia	1915/18 ²	
Soviet Union	1918	1-13 February
Estonia	1918	
Yugoslavia	1919 ²	
Romania	1919	1-13 April
Greece	1924	10-22 March
Persia	1925 ⁴	
Turkey	1926	19-31 December

1. The days which were omitted varied from one part of the country to another.
2. The date of the change is problematic; in some cases because different authorities give different dates.
3. Alaska changed when it was bought by the United States of America from Russia.
4. These countries had not used the Julian calendar before their adoption of the Gregorian in the year given.

Some countries changed their New Year's Day to 1 January before abandoning the Julian calendar.

Change-over list from Duncan *Calendar* (1998)

It was a different matter with the Orthodox and Protestant parts of Europe. They were disinclined to accept the logic of the calendar change because it gave the appearance of acting at the behest of the pope of Rome. They therefore dug in their heels and stuck to the old Julian calendar rather than accept the pope's authority. In England it appeared like a rehearsal for the recent debate there over the adoption of the Euro. Queen Elizabeth and her government were in favour of the change; advised by the astronomer John Dee they planned in the course of 1583 to drop three days in May, one in June and three each in July and August. However approval was not forthcoming from Edmund Grindal the puritan Archbishop of Canterbury. He said that cosyng up to Rome in this way would put England in schism with the other Protestant churches. Furthermore the Church of England could not accept an edict from a papacy that 'all the reformed churches in Europe for the most part do hold and affirm is Antichrist'. Therefore a bill for calendar reform, tabled for the 1584 parliament, had to be quietly dropped. Presumably the growing tide of anti-popery made it impossible to proceed with the kingdom under threat from foreign invasion.

The English authorities in Dublin, without a parallel development in England, were not in favour of adopting the pope's new calendar in Ireland. However that did not necessarily stop the process. One must assume that the Catholic Church would have pushed the change—this after all was an age when the church and its agents were still the primary keepers of time—and there were Catholic lords ruling parts of Ireland where the writ of the queen of England did not run. On the face of it the change should be clearly observable. The days of the week in each calendar still ran in tandem—Sunday was still Sunday—but under the new Gregorian calendar Catholics would now have had their Holy days ten days before Protestants and in many cases the date of Easter and the moveable feasts dependent upon it also changed.

In 1583 Easter in both calendars actually occurred on the same day. Subtracting ten days from the New Style date takes us back to the Old Style date on 31 March—there are finite number of Sundays on which Easter could occur! The following year the New Style Easter happened four weeks earlier than the Old Style one. In a letter dated 26 March 1584 Old Style the government in Dublin reported to London that Hugh O'Neill, the Baron of Dungannon, was at Strabane with his old adversary Turlough Luineach O'Neill 'solemnizing their new Easter of the Pope his appointing'. The Old Style Easter was still three weeks away. Dublin was alarmed at this diplomatic activity which saw not only the hitherto loyal Baron of Dungannon sinking his differences with the ageing Turlough Luineach but also both men making in effect a joint religious declaration. The Lords Justices in Dublin reported themselves as being 'mere strangers' to these goings-on in the North.



Hugh O'Neill (Courtesy of Lord Dunsany)

Was this Easter celebration undertaken by the two main Gaelic lords of the North in 1584 of religious significance or was it a mere political gesture? We have no more evidence until 1590. When at the start of the year Hugh O'Neill executed his rival for power Hugh Gavelach MacShane O'Neill, it was reported that Gavelach had been captured by Maguire's bastard son 'on Christmas Eve last by the new computation'. Furthermore later in 1590 Miler Magrath, the Church of Ireland archbishop of Cashel, reported on the state of Popish church in Ireland to the authorities in London. Miler was well-placed to do so, hailing as he did from Ulster and having originally been the Catholic bishop of Down. He stated that the Catholic church in Ulster was still a going concern under the leadership of Redmond O'Gallagher, bishop of Derry and *custos Armaghensis*.

'Being one of the three Irish bishops that were in the Council of Trent, this bishop used all manner of spiritual jurisdiction throughout all Ulster, consecrating

churches, ordaining priests, confirming children and giving all manner of dispensations, riding in pomp and company from place to place, as it was accustomed in Queen Mary's days, and for the rest of the clergy there they use all manner of service now as in that time *and not only that but they have changed the time, according to the Pope's new invention*'.

However in Munster where Magrath also discussed the state of institutional Catholicism he made no mention of a similar calendar change. It is also notable that *The Annals of Loch Cé* composed in Roscommon up until 1590 used the Old Calendar. However, K.W. Nicholls, my UCC colleague, has come across wills from County Meath which must have been dated in the New Style. The testators' deaths were registered by the state on a date before that which the deceased, presumably Catholics attended by their priests, had signed and dated their wills. It must therefore be the case that the calendar change was adopted solely in the ecclesiastical province of Armagh and not elsewhere because only there was enough church organisation to hold synod and enough open political support. This begs another question of how far the Counter-Reformation was established in Ulster. For instance, Peter Lombard in his *Commentarius* describes in lurid terms the expedient used by O'Neill and O'Donnell to enforce clerical celibacy. They decreed that wives were to separate from their priestly husbands and those that refused to do so would be subject to whipping, branding, slitting of their faces and ultimately banishment.

Certainly during the Nine Years War, O'Neill, O'Donnell and their confederates employed the new calendar. In the spring and early summer of 1596 the crown intercepted letters dated New Style to O'Neill from his secretary Henry Hovenden. These were important intercepts. The first is a letter of advice to O'Neill on the pros and cons of making peace with England and the second written after the intervention of Spanish agents reveals the deliberate delaying tactics which the confederates were using in negotiations with the state. Writing from O'Donnell's camp in Connacht, Hovenden began: 'All the delays that could possibly be used for prolonging the causes here have not been omitted.' Soon the crown was inserting phrases into the periodic ceasefire arrangements that it was forced to make with the Confederates indicating that these agreements were being determined by the Anglican computation lest the Irish would take advantage of their dating system to go on the offensive ten days early! The Earl of Essex's six-week ceasefire with O'Neill after the famous meeting at the ford of Bealnaclinthe is titled 'Articles agreed upon for a cessation of arms between the lord lieutenant of Ireland and the earl of Tirone on the 8th of September 1599 in the old stile'.

Articles agreed vpon for a
cessation of Armes between the
Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and the
Earle of Tirone, on the .8.th of September
1599 in the old stile .

1. That the Earle of Tirone shall undertake for
all those that are ioynd wth him, that for the space
of six weekes (beginning at the day of the date hereof)
there shall be a cessation of armes, and that in the
remote parts of this Kingdome the cessation shall
begin as soon as knowledge is given of this agreement.
And if any that are now ioynd wth the Earle of Tirone
shall refuse this agreement, they shall be by him left
to be persecuted by the Lord Lieutenant of
Ireland.
2. That yt shall be in the power of either side to continue
the cessation from .6. weekes to .6. weekes till May
day, or to break yt upon further dayes warning.
3. That for all injuries that are committed during the
cessation there shall be iustice done and restitution made
within twenty dayes after knowledge given.
4. That the Earle of Tirone shall take his oathe
for the performance of all the said articles.

James Tirone



O'Neill also had become daring enough to write to the crown using the pope's calendar – for instance one endorsed 'copy of the earl of Tyrone's letter dated the 7 of December 1597 but received from him in November 1597'. O'Neill also dated his famous proclamation to the Palesmen in November 1599 by the Gregorian calendar. This ends:

I seeking the publick utility of my native country and means for your salvation will prosecute these wars until that generally Religion be planted throughout all Ireland, so I rest praying the almighty to move your flinted hearts to prefer the commodity and profit of our country before your private ease.

Dungannon, this fifteenth of November 1599.

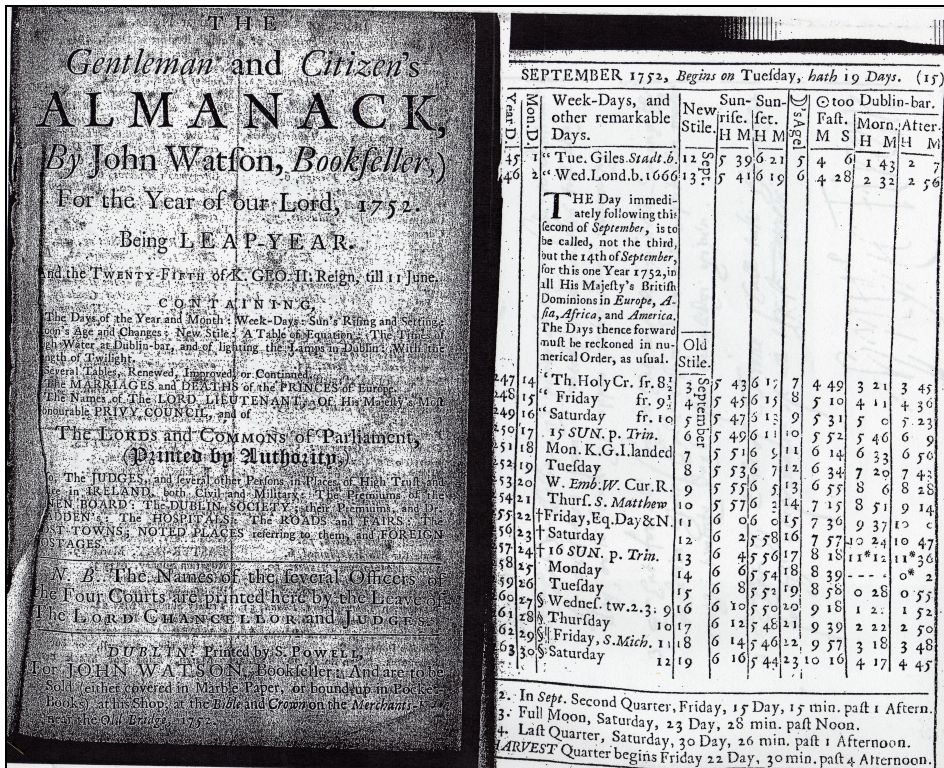
This appeal to the Palesmen on the grounds of common religion and nationality fell on deaf ears. Nevertheless we do know it was dated New Style. Thomas Barnwell of Robertstown County Meath acquired a copy on 8 November Old Style and made a declaration to that effect to the Dublin government on 15 November Old Style. It might be argued that the Confederate usage of the new calendar was mere gesture politics, an exercise in contrariness. However it did serve to identify their cause with the pope's and to underscore their demand for the free exercise of Catholicism.

Did the use of the new calendar in Ireland survive the defeat at Kinsale and the collapse of the Confederate cause? The institutional strength of the Catholic church in Ulster was severely undermined by the Plantation and throughout the country Catholics were subject to ferocious episodes of persecution. It is in the context of this persecution that we have confirmation that the new calendar was only in use in the ecclesiastical province of Armagh. The Jesuit Annual letter of 1605 records the hanging of Father Bernard Carolan by the provost marshal on Good Friday. It states 'like most northerns he kept the new style'. A contemporary history of the Franciscans records the martyrdom of Bishop Cornelius O'Deveney at Dublin on 1 February 1612 – '*juxta computum Kalenarii veteris, quod in illa parte Hiberniae adhuc observatur*' i.e. in the part of Ireland where the old calendar was still observed. He was a northern bishop killed by the state authorities in Dublin where even amongst Catholics the Gregorian calendar was not in use. The problem was that the date change in the North made persecution easier. The change in date as regards feast days had a clear impact in separating Protestants from Catholics. This also happened in Central Europe where the Thirty Years War was about to break out. In the small German states, neighbouring regions which differed in their choice of religion were after 1582 suddenly celebrating Easter, Christmas and other significant dates in the Christian calendar at different times. In the Czech lands there was considerable confusion because the large Protestant minority refused to accept the New Calendar.

To avoid the persecution to which the calendar difference was now exposing them in a province increasingly populated by incoming Protestants, the Catholics of Ulster applied to *Propaganda Fide* in Rome in 1630 to be dispensed from the use of the new calendar. So far I have been unable to determine when they returned to the old calendar but the dispensation was certainly in place by the time of the 1641 rebellion. For instance the dating of the entries in *Cín Lae Uí Mhealláin* [Friar O'Mellan's Journal], which

recorded the rising in Ulster between 1641 and 1647, is in the old style. Interestingly neither the Catholic Confederation of Kilkenny in the 1640s nor the Catholic-dominated Patriot Parliament in James II's time attempted to introduce the new calendar. These movements were however far less separatist than the Irish Confederates of the 1590s.

The British state eventually adopted the new calendar in 1752. Fearing falling a further day behind—that is eleven days—most Protestant states in continental Europe had adopted the new calendar in 1700. The philosopher Leibnitz was influential in arguing for this change. England eventually came into line in 1752. This time the bill in the 1750-51 Westminster parliament was passed with little rancour. It enacted the change 'in and throughout all his Majesty's dominions and countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and America, belonging or subject to the crown of Great Britain'. The change was accepted in Ireland, though Grattan's Parliament of 1782 felt the need to formally enact the legislation again because this was a case of the Westminster parliament exercising its alleged superiority over its Irish counterpart. The interesting thing to observe is how religion had ceased to be such a contentious issue. It was not a question of reconciliation with Rome - the last glimmer of a Catholic revanché had been defeated with Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. Indeed the calendar change-over was not about the loss of saints' days as it had been in 1582 but about the fair days that might be lost or which would have to be re-arranged. Commerce had triumphed over religion. For instance for the change-over in September 1752 Faulkner's Dublin Journal printed a ready-reckoner: 'As many persons will chuse to compute their rent, interest, annuities, wages, pensions, salaries etc from new Michelmas Day and not from the old, the following will shew what must be abated from £100 to £500,000 in account of the anticipation of 11 days made by the Act'.



1752 Irish Almanac

By default this solved the problem of the calendar as a distinction between Protestants and Catholics. They were now all on the same-dating system. This was how the Orangemen, founded subsequently in 1795, came to celebrate another famous battle – the Boyne fought on 1 July 1690 Old Style – on the Twelfth by a system of dating originally decreed in 1582 by ‘that man of the sin’, the pope of Rome.

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Further reading:

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Posted by *HIRAM MORGAN IRCHSS SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, February 2009*