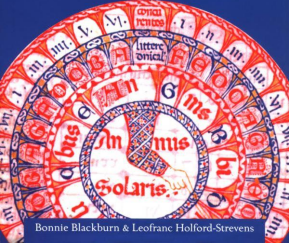


THE OXFORD
COMPANION TO THE

YEAR

*An exploration of calendar customs
and time-reckoning*



Bonnie Blackburn & Leofranc Holford-Strevens

WHEN WAS PLATO'S BIRTHDAY?
WHAT ARE THE BACCHAN DANCES?
HOW SHOULD TWELFTH NIGHT BE CELEBRATED?
WHICH YEARS CONTAINED A FEBRUARY 30TH?
ON WHAT DATE DO THE DOG DAYS BEGIN?

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& *Leofranc Holford-Strevens*

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PREFACE

This book is intended at once to entertain and to inform. It was first conceived by Rob Scriven, then Senior Editor in the Arts and Reference Division of Oxford University Press, as a modern-day version of Robert Chambers's *Book of Days* (1864), that quintessentially nineteenth-century gathering of useful and amusing lore on calendar customs, filled out with whatever popped into the author's mind when the days ran thin, and described in his subtitle as 'A miscellany of popular antiquities in connection with the calendar, including anecdote, biography, & history, curiosities of literature, and oddities of human life and character'. But whereas Chambers covered 366 days in two volumes of some 800 pages each in small print and double column, we were required to accommodate 367 days (including 30 February, a day acknowledged thrice in human history) within a single volume, of more generous typography, while leaving room for a second part that should treat of calendars in general, review the history of the modern Christian or international calendar, and give some account of the chief non-Christian calendars. We were therefore required to exclude, except in rare instances, birth and death dates of famous people, more particularly since there are many such books of dates in existence. Part I was written jointly by both authors; Part II is the exclusive work of Leofranc Holford-Strevens, who is also responsible for all translations throughout the book unless otherwise stated on the page or in the Bibliography.

We have adhered quite closely in Part I to our instructions, that we should list only events and people commemorated on a certain day. History is all too likely to overtake us on national days; that is the hazard of all such time-bound compilations. We have not listed the many World or National This-and-That Days proclaimed by institutions and corporations that serve as nothing but copy for desperate feature-writers; the humour would soon wear off, nor have we the political authority to decide the relative or absolute merits of causes called good, promoted on a particular day that they may be forgotten for the rest of the year. Apart from British and US holidays and commemorations, we have not made any effort to be comprehensive; our descriptions of holidays in other countries were chosen as the fancy moved us, and since they are often taken from historical sources may no longer reflect current customs.

Some holidays that now seem quite secular are based on the Christian calendar; in many cases this only returns them to their original status, as pagan celebrations which the Church attempted to extirpate. It will not please all readers to be reminded (even in our use of the traditional abbreviations BC and AD) that the calendar of ancient Rome has become the modern international standard as a result of Christianity; those to

whom these facts are offensive may care to devise, and then persuade the human race to use, a truly non-sectarian and politically neutral calendar with an era whose epoch shall be equally auspicious for all the world (and not merely its secularist liberals). Failing such a calendar, and such an era, we see no virtue in evading manifest facts; nor can we apologize for the overwhelmingly Christian content of Part I (certain references to ancient Rome apart). Festivals of other religions, which are mostly based on the lunar calendar and can rarely be accommodated to specific Roman days, are described in Part II.

Calendar customs can be deceptive; though their origins sometimes seem lost in the mists of time, not infrequently they are in fact quite modern, or deliberate revivals. This is particularly true in our own age, where tourist opportunities have become the glint in the eye of communities with changing economies. Because so much of our material is based on historical sources, it would not surprise us if enterprising councils were to discover interesting possibilities. On the other hand, calendar-based holidays are difficult to fit on their proper days in an industrial society; indeed, many holidays, once calendrical, have been moved to the nearest Monday to afford a longer weekend, with a concomitant decline in the day's original significance.

Many of the commemorations included in this book will arouse different responses in different readers. More than one religion, sect, cause, or nation has its heroes and its martyrs, who may not be revered by those against whom they contended; however much one may admire their personal qualities, one can no more promiscuously approve their principles than simultaneously endorse the intentions of all national leaders or political prisoners. Even more embarrassing are miracle stories, less because modern readers cannot believe in them than because, though narrated in more than one interest, they imply unique possession of divine favour: only Elijah, and not the priests of Baal, could call down fire on Mount Carmel. Yet there was a time when miracles were accepted as undoubted fact, even when performed by the other side: not only Aaron, but the wise men of Egypt could turn rods into serpents; St Luke may speak of Simon Magus' sorceries and St Philip's miracles, but—a fact his translators disguise—he uses the same Greek word for the amazement caused by both. Neither early Christians nor their pagan enemies denied that the other party could 'make signs', as they called it; to be sure its signs might be belittled as wrought through evil spirits, or temporary in their effect, but in the last resort they had to be admitted as facts and discounted as proofs. Ancient credulity joins modern scepticism against medieval faith.

In any case, belief or disbelief, though vital to the historian, is of little or no relevance for commemorations. Let us imagine an Italian village preparing to celebrate the feast-day of its patron saint in the 1960s. We may suppose, especially if we are in one of the former papal states, that the mayor is a Communist and therefore, at least officially, an atheist; the doctor, a man of science and *laico* as few Anglo-Saxons know how to be, has little time for the Church and none at all for miraculous cures; the schoolmaster reserves his position on miracles, but dismisses the non-miraculous portion of the *vita* as a farrago of anachronisms; the priest has heard from his cousin, who works at the Vatican, that the saint is about to be struck off the calendar for being totally fictitious.

Yet we may be sure that none of them will take part any the less wholeheartedly in the communal celebrations. Perhaps some celebrations inspired by our book will be individual rather than communal; nevertheless, it is in that spirit of not so much suspended as transcended disbelief that we commend our not always pious legends.

Moreover, while some celebrations are particular and hardly to be understood in other cultures or societies, others illustrate concerns that recur from tale to tale and cult to cult; above all the harvest and the weather. It is said that a Roman once asked the great rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai: 'We have festivals and you have festivals; we have the New Year, Saturnalia, and the Emperor's accession-day; you have Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and Tabernacles; which is the day on which we both rejoice alike?' The rabbi answered: 'It is the day when rain falls.'

Weather proverbs have a surprisingly long life; many people will recall that associated with St Swithun, though they know nothing of the saint himself. In earlier times, mnemonic rhymes attached to a saint's day reminded farmers of the time to plant or to harvest, and we all know that April showers bring May flowers. But do birds really mate in the middle of February, on St Valentine's Day? Does the cuckoo first appear around the 3rd of April? It must be remembered that all such proverbs are based on the Julian calendar, which was kept in Britain and the colonies until September 1752, when eleven days were dropped from the year to bring it in line with the Gregorian reform of 1582; thus, with the centennial leap days that have accrued since then, all weather proverbs are now out of date by thirteen days, and from 2100 will be out by fourteen.

The days are grouped by month, each month being introduced by proverbs, an account of its names in some other West European languages, with etymologies where possible, a list of holidays and anniversaries not fixed on a particular date, and excerpts from various writers, notably Spenser (*The Faerie Queene*) and Nicholas Breton (*Fantasticks*), on the nature of the month. The entry for each day begins, under the heading, with its Roman name on the left and its Sunday Letter on the right, followed (where appropriate) by proverbs relating to that day, a list of holidays and anniversaries, and an account of the day's significance in ancient Rome. Next come the holy days and saints' days. A heading lists, in bold type, any red-letter days of the Church of England, as recognized in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) or the calendar of 1997, *The Christian Year* (CY), any Solemnity or Feast in the General Calendar of the Roman Catholic Church, or a major Orthodox feast, and in normal type any other holy days recorded in a current calendar. All these saints and holy days, unless cross-referred to another day, are discussed in the text beneath the heading.

Besides these saints, we have added (but not included in the heading) other saints who appealed to us on historical or legendary grounds; although some were admitted for their attractive personality, sanctity as such is not the pre-eminent quality of the majority, many of whom were the great historical figures of their day and politicians of the first order. The entry ends with any other matter relating to the day outside the foregoing categories, including poetry, none of it taken from Chambers's stock of minor nineteenth-century verse, which we have left for the twenty-first century to rehabilitate as the twentieth century has rehabilitated the poetry of the eighteenth.

Saints' days bring with them a complexity that is at once a problem and an opportunity: the variation in the day on which a saint is culted, both between Churches—especially between the Orthodox and the Western—and within the same Church over time, in particular after the liturgical reforms that both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church have in the last generation undergone. Our general principle has been to use the Western date except for those saints whose chief importance lies in the East; and to accept current dates in the West except when their former days were significant outside the Church, for instance in festivals or weather proverbs. Since we are publishing in England, we have in cases of perplexity allowed the Church of England a casting vote. However, we have occasionally exploited the choice of dates to register a saint on the day for which we had less material otherwise; in any event we have cross-referred from one date to the rest.

We make no apology for including saints of very doubtful authenticity, simply because their legends have proved so enduring a legacy in history and art. St George, though derided in the sixteenth century as no more than a tavern sign, is still the patron saint of England; his day has now been raised by the national church to a principal feast. Some will no doubt seem obscure, but none more so than some of the saints in Chambers, such as the fourth-century virgin martyr St Synclética on 5 January. Readers suffering from a surfeit of saintliness will find relief under 12 June.

Following 31 December, we have treated the other divisions of the year, from weekdays to seasons, drawing our material from folklore as well as historical documents. The church holidays dependent on the date of Easter—the moveable feasts—have been placed in a separate section; too many books make the mistake of fitting them on the days in the year in which the book was written. Other secular holidays not fixed as to day, such as Thanksgiving, are found in the final section of Part I. Our first part is admittedly eclectic and idiosyncratic, and we hope it will enlighten as well as amuse.

Part II is the reference side of the *Companion*. Here we explain calendars of many kinds, both contemporary and historical, and the organization of time in various ways. We have included many explanations that will be useful to historians, such as how to find the date of Easter for any given year (App. H) and how to find the day of the week for any known date (App. G). We believe this to be the first book to notice within the same covers both Otto Neugebauer's non-Westernized account of the Alexandrian Easter that both Rome and Constantinople adopted without fully understanding its principles, and the definitive account by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and Dan McCarthy of the Celtic Easter whose defeat at the Synod of Whitby in 664 secured the Roman orientation of the English church. We list important dates in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim calendars to 2020 in Appendix K, and provide tables of regnal years of English and British Sovereigns (App. A) and of Popes (App. B), which are often used in dating. The conversion of dates between various systems is treated in Appendix F.

No doubt some readers will find Part II distressingly mathematical, others not nearly mathematical enough. The latter will find grist to their mill in the works by Nachum Dershowitz and Edward M. Reingold, and by E. G. Richards cited in our Bibliography; to the former we can offer no redress beyond the tables offered to save the need for

calculation. In particular, the account of the computus by which the date of Easter is determined, and the lunar calendar on which it rests, is complicated both by the nature of the subject (even more so since Pope Gregory's reform) and by the conflicting principles and divergent methods employed in the earlier Christian centuries; those who wish to understand as well as know (if in defiance of Plato we admit the difference) must not be afraid of a long march. We have done our best to level the route, but we can no more abridge it than Euclid could offer King Ptolemy I a royal short cut to geometry.

In the early eleventh century Byrhtferth, a monk of Ramsey, devoted much of his bilingual *Enchiridion*, or handbook of necessary knowledge, to expounding the calendar; especially but not only in the English portions, he adopts the manner of the expansive schoolmaster, attempting to infect the boys in his monastic school with his own enthusiasm for the subject. 'We divide the days of the year by seven, and so we arrive joyfully at the understanding of a very great mystery.' Even leap day, which superstitious persons regarded as unlucky, becomes 'venerable'; and another topic is introduced by the assertion that 'we seek to enter the vineyard of labour with beautiful feet', like those of them that preach the gospel of peace. No doubt there were suppressed giggles, as there were when the headmaster of a Victorian public school, addressing the Classical Sixth, rubbed his hands and declared: 'Boys, this term you will be privileged to study the *Oedipus Coloneus* of Sophocles, a play absolutely brimming with grammatical difficulties.' Nevertheless, there are those who relish the study of grammatical difficulties, and computus too has its fascinations for those who appreciate structures and systems.

Throughout the book, an asterisk prefixed to a date or a word serves as a cross-reference for further information; when it is prefixed to a word, the relevant matter will be found in the same Part, whether I or II, unless the other is specified. This has not been done in Part II for dates, since they will all be found in Part I.

Those brought up to believe in the unique and inexhaustible wealth of English vocabulary, without considering how that wealth has been acquired, will be dismayed by the technical terms imported from other languages; but in relation to days and time we found not wealth but poverty, and a dearth of conceptual precision. Danes and Russians have words in common use to denote a period of twenty-four hours irrespective of its starting-point; English has no such word, but must borrow the Greek *nychthemeron*. A date comprises a day, a month, and frequently a year; but there is no English word with the specific sense of the day, excluding the month and year, like the French *quantième*, which it seemed better to borrow than to loan-translate 'how-manyeth'. Likewise, for the year, considered as a number rather than a period, we have adopted *millésime*, which so far from being abstruse is the regular term for the year stamped on a coin or printed on a wine-label.

In complex expositions, words are more convenient than phrases: we may ask what day of the week it is without feeling the need for a single word, but for explaining the mode of calculation 'day of the week' cannot compete in handiness with 'feria'. To be sure, in liturgical use a feria is a day that is neither a Sunday nor a feast; nevertheless, to the computist the word denotes the day of the week, which 'weekday' has long since

refused to do. Nor could English provide a word for 'day of the lunar month', expressed in both classical and medieval Latin by *luna*; in particular, Easter is defined as the Sunday following *luna XIV*. This cannot be translated '14th moon', which would mean the fourteenth month; we have therefore allowed 'lune', already used in geometry, to take on this meaning too. For the rest, we refer readers to our Glossary, but warn them now that we call the period of daylight not the natural but the artificial day, following Bede and Chaucer. The Glossary also includes a few terms relating to the theological controversies in which some of our saints were embroiled.

Many people have given us the benefit of their expertise in various areas, ranging from calendar customs in Brazil to the intricacies of the Celtic calendar. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Hazel Allsop, Gráinne Bourke, Jonas Carlqvist, William Clemmell, Joseph Connors, Richard Copsey OCarm., Frank D'Accone, Warren Drake, Maureen Fant, George Ferzoco, Peter Foden, Paula Garner, David Howlett, Petrus Kaartinen, Martin Kauffmann, Richard Landes, Michael Linck, Alexander Lingas, Dan McCarthy, Paul Meyvaert, Carolyn Muessig with (all unknowing) members of the medieval-religion e-list, Helen Conrad O'Briain, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, Vivian Ramalingam, Joshua Rifkin, Jenni Scott, Janos Simon, Barry Smith, Claus Tondering, Jens Ulf-Møller, John Waś, and Connie and Jonathan Webber. Our two very knowledgeable readers, Ronald Hutton and Jeremy Marshall, provided the ideal mix of correction, encouragement, and suggestions for improvement, both in content and focus. Alison Jones, our editor when the volume reached press, skilfully guided the book through production. Sarah Barrett, our copy-editor, took on a daunting task with fortitude and good humour. George Tulloch proved invaluable as a proofreader and fresh pair of eyes.

We spent a very profitable month at the beginning of our work as holders of a short-term fellowship at the Newberry Library in Chicago, where books and scholars happily coexist. Most of our research, however, has been conducted in the British Library and above all in the Bodleian Library, whose resources continue to surprise and delight. We looked at much more than we could use, as the staff of Duke Humfrey and the Upper and Lower Reading Rooms will readily recognize; we owe them a particular debt for their labours in our behalf.

Given on the tenth day before the Ides of May, on the Feast of St John at the Latin Gate, in the forty-seventh year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II.

B.J.B.

L.A.H.-S.

6 May 1998 (*Old St George's Day*)
Oxford



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ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Anno Christi	Diocl.	(year of) Diocletian
AD	Anno Domini	<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
AH	Anno Hegirae	GMT	Greenwich Mean Time
AM	Anno Mundi	GN	Golden Number
AP	Anno Passionis	Inc.	Incarnation (Alexandrian)
AS	Anno Seleuci	ind.	indiction
ASB	Alternative Service Book	JD	Julian Day
AUC	Anno urbis conditae	JP	(year of) Julian Period
AY	Anno Yezdegirdae	<i>N & Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
BC	Before Christ	NS	New Style
BCE	Before Common Era	<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
BCP	Book of Common Prayer	Ol.	Olympiad
BL	British Library	Orth.	Orthodox
CE	Common Era	OS	Old Style
CofE	Church of England	RC	Roman Catholic
commem.	commemoration	SE	Saka Era
CY	<i>The Christian Year: Calendar, Lectionary and Collects (1997)</i>		

PART I

CALENDAR

CUSTOMS



JANUARY

*He that will live another year
Must eate a ben in Januvere.*

*The blackest month in all the year
is the month of Janiveer.*

☞ **NAMES FOR THE MONTH** Latin *Ianuarius*, French *janvier*, Spanish *enero*, Portuguese *Janeiro*, Italian *gennaio*, German (in Germany and Switzerland) *Januar*, (in Austria) *Jänner*, Welsh *Ionawr*, Scots Gaelic *an Faoilteach*, Irish *Eanáir*

The name *Ianuarius* is derived from *ianua*, 'door', and is associated with the two-headed god Janus (see Pl. 1); it is therefore apt for the first month, which January was despite the evidence that the honour had once belonged to March. It is possible that the dead days of winter were not at first counted: the legendary founder of Rome, the bluff soldier-king Romulus (purported dates 753–715 BC), was said to have devised a ten-month calendar from March to December, and his no less legendary successor, the pious intellectual Numa (715–673 BC), to have added January and February.

Many Scots Gaelic names now assigned in standard usage to Roman months are reported in older dictionaries with other senses: thus *faoilteach* or *faoilleach*, from *faol*, 'wild' (or in compounds 'wolf'), is properly a time of wild winter weather, and was sometimes defined as the last fortnight of winter and the first of spring (which began on 1 Feb. OS). For the corresponding term *faoillí*, see *1 Feb. Other names on record are *am Míos Marbh*, 'the dead month', and *Deireadh-Geambraidh*, 'the end of winter', in accordance with a system of month names most fully preserved in Manx that counted each month the beginning, middle, or end of its season.

☞ **HOLIDAYS AND ANNIVERSARIES**

First Monday Handsel Monday, when gifts were given to servants and children. Anything received on that day is supposed to bring luck for the coming year. (See **Other Holidays*.)

Third Monday USA: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday (public holiday)
Virginia: Lee–Jackson Day
Alabama and Mississippi: Robert E. Lee's Birthday

Last Tuesday Shetland: Up–Helly–Aa, a festival marking the end of Christmas or rather Yule, the emphasis being laid on Norse ancestors; 'Vikings' parade in Lerwick.

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