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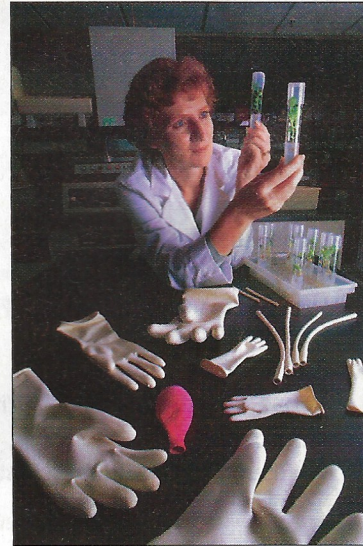
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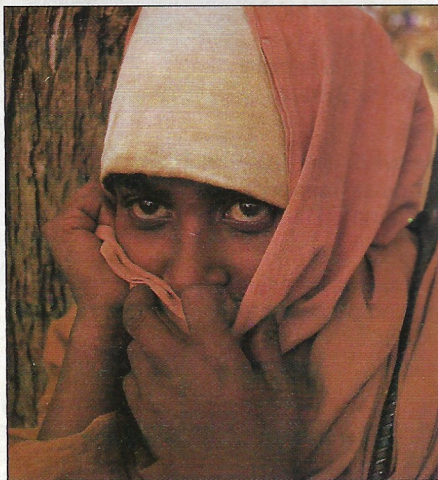
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A Gift at New Year

Reclaiming Scottish Hogmanay

B.R. Forbes

Shivering on the front step of a brick house at 11:59 P.M. on December 31, clutching a lump of coal, shortbread, and whiskey, I await the stroke of midnight.

If tradition is truly handed down from one generation to the next, at this moment I would be warm, indoors, nibbling little egg-and-olive crustless sandwiches, singing

“Auld Lang Syne” with Guy Lombardo on the TV, and toasting the New Year with ginger ale, as if I were eight years old again.

Or if tradition is a shared cultural experience, then I would be spilling my generic dance-club champagne on my gyrating partner and anticipating the midnight kiss that could well last until dawn. Or I would be dashing from a folk music concert, past melting ice sculptures, to city hall for First Night fireworks.

Instead I choose this doorstep, at this time, for this particular reinvention of Hogmanay—New Year’s Eve with a Scottish brogue.

A tenth-generation Scots American celebrating a uniquely Scottish hol-

iday needs a bit of nerve and a lot of imagination. Boiled Spam does not haggis make. But, since discovering this holiday a few years back, I steeped myself in researching a few hundred years’ worth of traditions. I found that the holiday is much like the Scots themselves: No one is quite sure of its origin, it’s absorbed aspects of different cultures, it’s survived despite great adversity—and a vast quantity of whiskey is involved.



■ **Left:** The tradition of firstfooting: The first person to enter a home in the new year must be a healthy male bearing gifts, such as shortbread, whiskey, coal, and silver. **Opposite:** Midnight fireworks at Edinburgh’s massive street party.



JEREMY SUTTON-HIBBERT / JUNGLE EVENTS LIMITED

■ Mary Stuart, queen of Scots (in funerary effigy), and Oliver Cromwell were both inadvertently responsible for the emergence of Hogmanay.

Revelry for a sun reborn

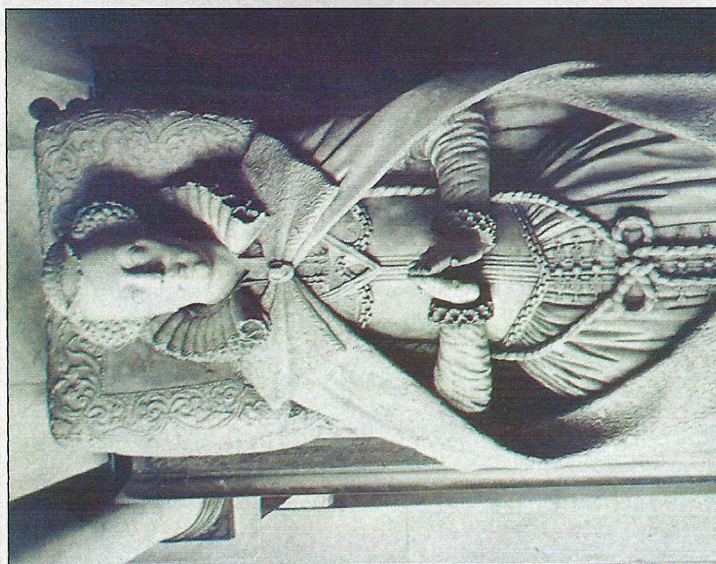
No one really knows the origin of the word *hogmanay*. Is it based on the Greek *hagia-mana*, “holy month”; the Scandinavian *Hoggo-nott*, or “slaughter night,” the day before the celebration of Yule; or the Anglo-Saxon *Haleg Monath*, meaning “Holy Month”? Other possibilities include the Flemish *hoog min dag*, “great day of affection”; German *hogg* (kill) and *minn* (remembrance), to give us “remember your sacrifices on the feast of Thor”; Gaelic *oge maidne*, “new morning”; or medieval French *au gui l’an neuf* (to the mistletoe of the new year), which has evolved into *anguillanneuf*, a “gift at New Year.”

Holy month, slaughter night, great day of affection, remember your sacrifices, new morning—these are amazingly different concepts for the same holiday. Yet aspects of each are part of the history of Hogmanay.

Ancient pagans worshiped the “rebirth” of the sun at the winter solstice, marking the occasion with bonfires and torchlit processions meant to represent

the sun’s return. Feasting and drinking became a part of winter’s rituals when the conquering Romans brought Saturnalia, a celebration honoring the god Saturn, on their push northward from Gaul to Briton. Revelry was also a part of the 24-day Viking Yule, which honored the birth of a sun goddess, Freya. Though the Scots had been exposed to the celebration during five hundred years of violent Viking raids, their basic disposition took to it nonetheless, and it became part of their winter.

Passion, piety, and politics in the second millennium shaped Hogmanay. England’s Princess Margaret shipwrecked in Scotland in 1066 while fleeing the invading William of Normandy. Winning the heart of King Malcolm Canmore, she became queen and initiated the observance of Christ Mass during the Yule celebration. In the Middle Ages, Yule’s “twelve days of Christmas” evolved into the “Daft Days” (also known as “Fête des Fous,” a product of Scotland’s ties with France). This festival involved electing a lord or abbot of misrule, who oversaw a reprieve from work for the lower orders, mock masses, masquerading (much like



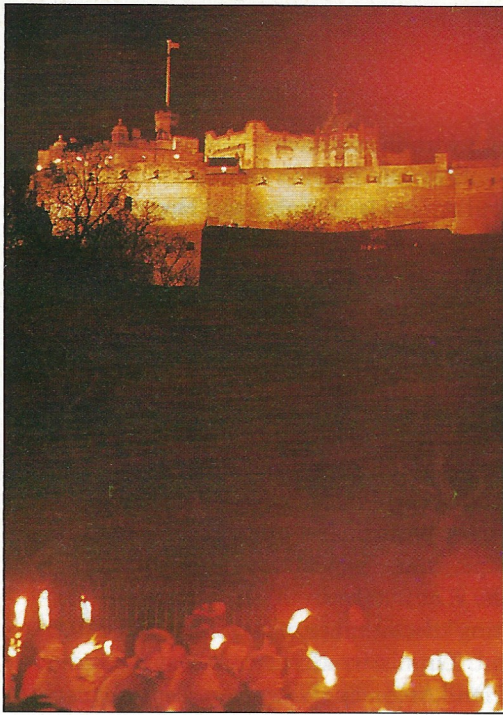
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Falling out of practice

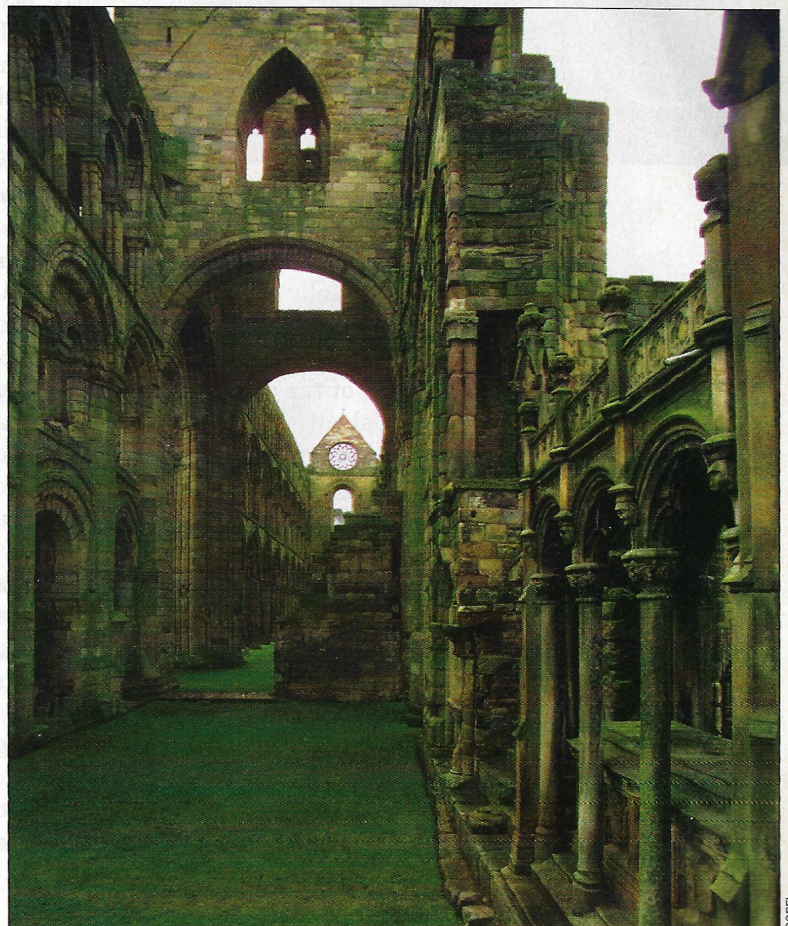
In the past few hundred years, local customs have developed. Though they are as varied as clan tartans, some common elements remain: cleaning out the old, welcoming visitors, sharing gifts, feasting, lighting fires, “firstfooting,” and of course downing a wee dram or two of whiskey.

A new year means a fresh start—and a clean house was the first step. Dried juniper was burned to purify the home, and the windows were opened to bring in the fresh air. Families would host a party, or *ceilidh* (KAY-lee) in Gaelic, or visit their neighbors with gifts of food and drink. In

■ **Left:** The torchlit procession, which dates from ancient times, is still a big part of the Edinburgh celebration. **Below:** Inside Edinburgh Castle, the place of death of St. Margaret of Scotland, who introduced a Christian element to the New Year proceedings.

our modern-day Halloween), the exchange of small gifts, and, of course, dancing, drinking, and the usual revelry. All culminated on Twelfth Night, the last day of Yule.

In the sixteenth century, the Reformation brought a narrower view of the revelry surrounding Christmas. Mary, Queen of Scots, indulged greatly in the Daft Days merriment—which did not improve her relations with the Church of England. Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas in 1651. To avoid prosecution, the Scottish people began to celebrate the season’s secular traditions on Twelfth Night, days away from the Christian observance of Christmas. Not surprisingly, the celebration became less public and more centered on the home. By 1680, this secular holiday had evolved into Hogmanay, a name most likely derived from the French *anguillanneuf*, the slurred cry of Scottish children running from house to house requesting their New Year’s gift.



CORIEL

some parts of the Highlands and Western Isles, young boys would go from house to house to recite a *duan* (Gaelic for song poem, or ode); they were rewarded with



JEREMY SUTTON-HIBBERT / UNIQUE EVENTS LIMITED

gifts of bannocks (black buns), bread, cakes, and sweets. In larger towns, folk would gather, usually at a clock tower, to await the stroke of midnight. Bonfires were lit in town squares, and, in some towns, barrels of tar or wood shavings were paraded about.

The most enduring Hogmanay tradition is firstfooting. This refers to the first person who sets foot in a home in the new year. The best luck is to be firstfooted by a tall, healthy male bearing gifts. And he must be dark-haired—since in olden times a visit from a blond Viking did not bode well for the Scottish family! The gifts are usually both practical and symbolic, such as bread or shortbread, coal, whiskey, and a silver piece.

Today, the celebration of Hogmanay has taken on more modern tones, and

many traditions have fallen out of practice.

For our friends Deirdre, Jean-Luc, and Angus in Edinburgh, Hogmanay is one citywide street party. They have urged us to visit during the last week of December, when a staggering number of events will dominate the city: a huge, torchlit procession and fire festival, a thousand pipers marching from Edinburgh Castle to the Holyrood Park (a route known as the Royal Mile), a massed fiddlers' rally, fireworks, carnival rides, over three hundred street performers, and concerts of every type from classical to contemporary. For the year 2000 events, organizers are "limiting" the number of tickets to 180,000.

This is in direct contrast with our friend Angus in the western seaside town of Oban. A high school physics teacher and gold medalist in Gaelic singing, Angus usually spends Hogmanay watching the telly with his young family and perhaps raising a ruckus outside at midnight. And downing a dram of Oban's famous whiskey would not be out of the question.

In the United States, Hogmanay is a nonevent—even in my home of Alexandria, Virginia. Founded by Scottish merchants in 1749, Alexandria is the hub for most of the Scottish events in the Washington, D.C., area: Virginia Scottish Games and Festival, a Taste of Scotland, Alexandria Scottish Heritage Festival, Alexandria Scottish Christmas Walk, National Tartan Day Festival and Capitol Reception, Haggis Shoot, Tartan Ball, Bannockburn Feast, Kirkin' o' the Tartan at the National Cathedral, and at least three different Burns Nicht Suppers annually!

And yet . . . not even an acknowledgment of Hogmanay.

This does not surprise me. While Scottish Americans are active with events and organizations, for the most part our

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direct connections to the mainland are many generations in the past. Many Hogmanay events have combined with other traditions and been diluted in the melting pot of American culture; trick-or-treating, spring cleaning, Christmas dinner, champagne toasts, and “First Night” celebrations have all been influenced by Hogmanay.

Sharing the ‘water of life’

Scottish Americans such as myself have had to dig back into our history to reclaim some traditions—or create a few of our own. For example, the St. Andrew’s Society of Washington, D.C., reinvented the traditional “kirkin’ o’ the tartan.” When tartans, bagpipes, and the Gaelic language were banned by the conquering English in the mid-eighteenth century, Scots would sneak swatches of the tartans to the church, or kirk, to be blessed. Since 1941, the Scots Americans of the Washington area have celebrated an annual Kirkin’ o’ the Tartan, an event emulated throughout the country.

So with Hogmanay, my friends and I have reached back to the traditions of our Scottish ancestors and created our own distinct annual observance.

Which brings me to a cold doorstep at 11:59 P.M. on December 31.

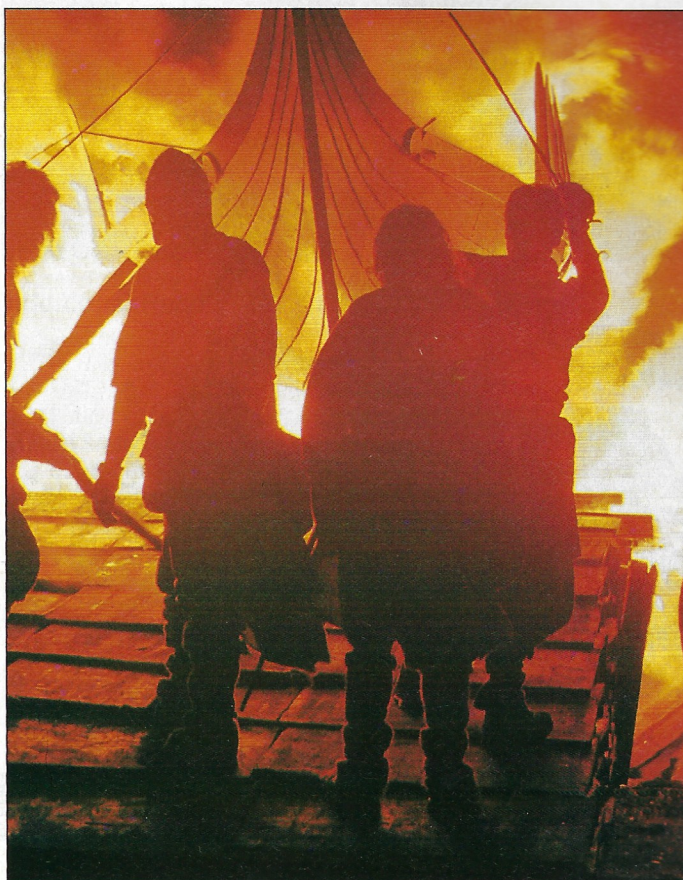
The home belongs to good friends Doug and Barb, whom my friend Nick and I know through various Scottish and Gaelic groups. We began celebrating New Year’s Eve together a couple years ago, added elements of Hogmanay—and now no longer refer to the evening as New Year’s Eve at all. We have chosen to avoid those traditions that may be a bit troublesome in modern America, such as going door to door singing Gaelic ditties and ask-

ing for handouts of bannocks, running around the neighborhood with barrels of burning tar on our heads, or, for that matter, cleaning house.

We toast the year past, the year ahead, and our time together at the moment. Being Scots Americans, we particularly enjoy sharing the “water of life,” the translation of the Gaelic term *uisge beatha* (OOSH-ka BEY-yeh), from which is derived the modern word *whiskey*. While Barb’s toasts usually involve the smooth yet complex Dalwhinnie, my drams tend toward the peatier Talisker or Lagavulin. Nick and Doug are most particular about choosing the closest open bottle of single malt whiskey.

Although haggis is the traditional

■ **Performers (opposite) and fire festival (below) at the Edinburgh street party.**



JEREMY SUTTON/HIBBERT / UNIQUE EVENTS LIMITED

■ **Below:** Firstfooting gifts: whiskey, peat, shortbread, and silver. **Opposite:** A knock at midnight.

Scottish dish, the local supermarket usually runs out of sheep's stomachs and lungs by the time we shop. So we settle for Barb's delicious scones from a traditional mix, salsa and chips (a nod to the influence of Scottish Mexicans), and Nick's heavenly atholl brose. Very much a traditional Scottish drink, atholl brose consists of eggs, cream, oatmeal, honey, whiskey, and at least a week of "aging." But due to popular demand, Nick has speeded up the process to under fifteen minutes by simply adding the honey, whiskey, and cream to

boiling water. Only a few whiffs are needed to savor this sweet nectar—but Scots are not known for their self-restraint. As the old Scottish Highland saying goes, "Moderation sir, aye, moderation is my rule. Nine or ten is reasonable refreshment, but after that it's apt to degenerate into drinking."

With one eye on the atholl brose pot and one eye on the clock, we await the time for the most serious part of our Hogmanay evening: firstfooting. While good luck for the new year calls for a tall, handsome, dark-haired man to enter the home first, the duty usually falls to me. Nick's coloration is reminiscent of marauding Vikings, and Doug is a premature gray. So off I trundle through the back door to the front, bearing an armload of gifts and wrapped in the warmth of atholl brose alone. Which wears off in another minute.

At last the clock strikes midnight. I can tell from the sounds of the neighborhood celebrating a more Americanized version of New Year's Eve: faint TV sets with cheering Times Square revelers, firecrackers, and, since this is Virginia after all, a lone handgun crack in the distance.

I knock on the door, which opens to my good friends. Taking care to step over the threshold with my right foot, I stumble over the Gaelic phrase for happy new year: "bliadhna mhath ur" (BLEE-uh-nuh VAH OOR) and then:

"I bring you coal so that your house may always be warm. I bring you bread so that you may never go hungry. I bring you silver so that you may prosper. And I bring you uisge beatha so that the year may bring you good cheer. Now give me a damn hug to warm me up!"

And back we go to the atholl brose.

If I were to accept our Scottish friends' invitation to the Edinburgh Hogmanay mega-festival, it wouldn't be the same.



B. H. FORBES

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Though I would be in the land of my ancestors, squeezing my way through a street festival and watching fireworks seems far less like Hogmanay than clutching coal and shortbread on a front step, waiting for midnight.

Somehow traditions adapt and endure. While I have exchanged the egg-and-olive sandwiches for scones and ginger ale for Lagavulin, I know I will soon be singing "Auld Lang Syne." Written by Scottish bard Robert Burns, this song is the one link between my new traditions and my old. Perhaps because of age or experience, I appreciate the words and its origins far more than when I watched Guy Lombardo on a black-and-white TV. The song celebrates the joy of friendships long remembered and friendships never to be forgotten. What better way to bring in the new year than with good friends and good whiskey!

Happy Hogmanay and bliadhna mhath ur! ■

On the Internet

HOGMANAY.NET

<http://www.hogmanay.net>

Provides a guide to the major Hogmanay celebrations in Scotland, a brief history, news items, listings of accommodations, and a chat area and message board.

"HOGMANAY: IT'S PARTY TIME," IN TNT MAGAZINE

<http://www.tntmag.co.uk/travel/s/scot-hog.htm>

Offers a brief history and a summary of events happening around Scotland.

EDINBURGH'S HOGMANAY

<http://www.edinburghshogmanay.org/>

Includes photos, a calendar of events, contact information for tickets, map of events, travel and safety tips, suggestions for accommodations, history, and more.



Additional Reading

The Hogmanay Companion, by Hugh Douglas, is published by Neil Wilson Publishing Ltd., 309 the Pentagon Centre, 36 Washington Street, Glasgow G3 8AZ and is available from Unicorn Limited, Inc., P.O. Box 397, Bruceton Mills, WV 26525, (304) 379-8803.

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