

Letter from Scotland



Arthur's Seat looking its
best for May Day.

Tradition has it that a young woman who washes her face in the dew on Arthur's Seat on the morning of the first of May will retain her beauty for life. And this has indeed proved true in my daughter's case. Several years ago now we went up that 250m hill at sunrise on May 1st and she washed her face in the dew. She still looks as young and beautiful as she did that day.

And she wasn't the only one on Arthur's Seat that morning. In fact the place was crowded with fresh faced young people who had staggered over from nearby Calton Hill where they'd been taking part in the traditional Gaelic fire festival of "Beltane." The evil spirits of winter are ceremonially set on fire and the May Queen and her entourage march triumphantly through the flames.

The ceremony was revived 30 years ago with a good deal of rock music, face paint and frightening costumes. This year the evil spirits will be, in the words of the organisers, " an unpleasant collective that have grown to fear and hate all those beyond their community. They will represent the past and contemporary mindset and policies that oppress the vulnerable, close borders and encourage the mob to follow blindly." I can't image what they are talking about.

But if that is not political enough for you, this May Day weekend will see trade union marches and rallies across the country – in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Kirkcaldy, Irvine etc.

In London, there will be the usual workers demonstration in

Trafalgar Square. Across the USA, I'm told, there will be marches and rallies against the Trump administration. The days of the Red Army marching through Red Square in Moscow are over but there is to be a May Day parade there next weekend, marking the 72nd anniversary of the Nazi surrender. We can expect this year's May Day marches in France to be especially excitable, with just a week to go to the final round in the presidential election.

Not that we have much liberty, equality, fraternity here in Scotland. This week Oxfam brought out a report which found that the richest one per cent of Scots have an income of £2,600 a week, while the poorest 10 per cent scratch a living on £240 a week.

The public services are showing further signs of strain brought on by the continuing "age of austerity." Our two flagship hospitals, the Queen Elizabeth in Glasgow and the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, both had media reports this week of staff shortages, over-crowding and lack of funds. Lecturers at Scotland's further education colleges went on a one day strike over pay and conditions.

Then there's the General Election campaign, becoming as heated in Scotland as it is in England. We are not quite at the stage of the May/Corbyn personal slagging match but the Conservatives and the SNP are facing each other like angry boxers at a weight-in. Nicola Sturgeon has been attacking the Tories over their support for the so-called "rape clause" in the new tax-credit system. And Ruth Davidson continues to allege that the SNP is cynically using the issue to discredit Westminster rule and further the cause of independence.

But as we start the race towards polling day on 8th June, all media eyes have been taken off the local elections which take place on Thursday. That of course will change on Friday, when the soothsayers will be pouring over the results to try to

predict the outcome of the general election. Will voters stay away on Thursday, waiting for the bigger event in June? Or will they vote one way in the local election and another way in the general election?

We've all been mesmerised by a trial going on at the High Court in Glasgow in which the tangled financial mess behind the scenes of Rangers Football Club is being exposed. Craig Whyte, the businessman who bought the club for £1 in 2011, is charged with fraud. It's alleged he misled the owner at the time, Sir David Murray, into believing he was putting his own money into the club to pay off its £18m debt. In fact he was using the proceeds of advance ticket sales.

Mr Whyte denies he's done anything wrong or illegal. But the whole sorry mess resulted, as the world knows, in Rangers being found guilty of tax avoidance and going into liquidation. That in turn resulted in demotion to the third division. It's been a long and winding road back into the premier league.

Finally, a white wedding a couple were not expecting. Becky and Rob, from Devon, decided they wanted a simple outdoor wedding on the top of Ben More in Mull. They wore their best walking gear, brought their two dogs as bridegroom and bridesmaid, engaged the local registrar and a photographer and persuaded two islanders to act as witnesses.

But as the party made its way up the 966m mountain last Monday, snow started falling and the wind got up. At 650m they had to stop. In the shelter of a rocky outcrop, the registrar married the cold and windblown couple. I hope he added the words "for better and for worse....weather." Thankfully, everyone returned safely to a local restaurant to dry out and enjoy a warm meal. May they live happily ever after and may May Day not be a Mayday.