

Letter from Scotland



The New Year came in with a bang and a large moon. The bang came from Edinburgh's famous Hogmanay fireworks and the moon was a Super Moon, 14 per cent bigger than normal and 30 per cent brighter. I was on Blackford Hill at the midnight hour, along with several hundred other celebrants of the New Year, watching the fireworks by the light of this Super Moon.



Once in a Blue Moon. Photo by Emmett Tullos.

It was the biggest moon we will see in 2018, a "Wolf Moon", only 221,559 miles away. You could almost touch it. Twelve of us have actually walked on it. And this isn't the only Super Moon of this month, there's another on the 31st, a "Blue Moon", so-called because it's the second of the month and they don't appear that often – though there happens to be another one in March.

We won't however see much of this Blue Moon because, for the first time in 150 years, there's to be a total eclipse of a Blue Moon that night. Strangely, it may even appear red as it dips behind the Earth's shadow because of the way the light is refracted. Don't we live in an interesting universe ?

It struck me this week that we haven't really moved very far away from the Sun and Moon worship of our Druid ancestors. Here we are setting fire to the evils of the old year with our firework displays and wondering what the Blue Moon in the new year will bring.



The [Loony Dook](#) at South Queensferry on New Year's Day is increasingly taking on the atmosphere of a Pagan festival of purging and refreshing and daring. Dressed in bizarre costumes, like tribal dancers, these crazed people dip into the sacred waters of the Firth of Forth. It's a cold-blooded version of Hindu worshipers on the banks of the River Ganges.

As if to wake us up after New Year, Storm Eleanor blew in from Ireland, bringing winds of over 70mph to central and southern Scotland. And this, combined with the big moon tides, led to a series of flood warnings which fortunately came to nothing.

The severe weather has plunged the NHS into its usual winter crisis with half of Scotland's health boards having to postpone routine operations just to deal with the broken bones and illnesses that occur at this time of the year. Scotland's newest hospital, the Queen Elizabeth in Glasgow, reported a 26 per cent rise in the number of attendances. Across Scotland, only 83 per cent of patients turning up at accident and emergency departments were seen within four hours, compared to 93 per cent in the same period last year.

Someone who doesn't need any medical help during the cold weather is Victoria, the polar bear at the Highland Wildlife Park on Speyside. She has given birth to a cub, the first to be born in the UK for 25 years. It's thought she may even have twins. But we won't see them till the spring, since Mum Victoria keeps them deep underground in her cosy warm cave.

News came this week of another underground miracle. The subway in Glasgow is to have driver-less trains. Indeed once the new fleet is running smoothly in 2021, there will be no staff on board at all, a first for the UK. All they need now is passenger-less trains and the £288m revamp will be complete.

Finally, I am pleased to see that my Scot of the Year, round the world cyclist Mark Beaumont, has been awarded a British Empire Medal in the New Year's honours list. Among the other

Scots honoured are John Curtice the political analyst, and Iain Torrance the theologian, who both become "Sirs" and the business woman Susan Rice who becomes a "Dame". The rugby star Ian "Mighty Mouse" McLauchlan wins an MBE, as does David Duke, the founder of Street Soccer Scotland, the charity helping boys out of poverty through football. Oh, and I mustn't forget another duke, the Duke of Buccleuch who becomes a Knight of the Thistle.