

Editorial

MILLENNIAL MUSINGS - THE HEREIN, NOW AND AFTER?

It is often the case that at the end of each year, the past and the future merge and dissolve into each other like the amber autumnal shades of dusk and the pallid moonlight at the end of a summer evening: warm feelings of satisfaction for tasks accomplished and completed mingle and blend with spine-chilling thoughts of impending deadlines still to be met, assignments yet to be signed off, work to be completed and aspirations yet to be achieved. It would be very much my suspicion that such inner thoughts and guilt-ridden ruminations were perhaps somewhat more acute and pronounced on the last Hogmanay of the century, not to say of ten centuries joined together. The end of a decade does concentrate the mind even more acutely, but the end of a millennium is most certainly a unique occasion.

The hype and hubris, the feverish pre-occupation and unrequited agitation that have characterised the last few months of 1999, and not least the delirious last few days of December 1999, reminded me of the contrast which the melancholic Italian poet, Giacomo Leopardi, elicits in two of his best known *Canti*. His characteristically introspective and disease-imposed pessimistic manner comes through poignantly in his *Il Sabato del villaggio* in which he depicts the anticipatory preparatory bustle of the Saturday night in a hamlet looking forward with considerable anticipation to the festive first day of the week:

<i>Queste di sette è il più gradito giorno,</i>	This day of seven is best of all
<i>Pien di speme e di goia</i>	So full of hope and joy
<i>Diman tristezza e noia</i>	The hours will bring ennui
<i>Recheran l'ore, ed il travaglio usato</i>	Tomorrow, and sadness, making everyone
<i>Ciascun il suo pensier far ritorno.</i>	Return in thought to his accustomed toil.

While in sharp contrast in his other *Canto*, *La sera del dì di festa* (*The evening of the festive day*), he muses on the celebratory day that has just passed away into oblivion forever:

<i>E fieramente mi si stringe il core,</i>	And cruelly it clutches at my heart
<i>A pensar come tutto al mondo passa,</i>	To think the world and all must pass and leave
<i>E quasi orna non lascia.</i>	Scarcely a trace. And now this festival
<i>Ecco è fugito</i>	Is gone, and hard upon its festive heels
<i>Il dì festivo, ed al festivo il giorno</i>	The common day must tread; time steals away
<i>Volgar succede; e se ne porta il tempo</i>	All human circumstance...
<i>Ogni umano accidente...</i>	

To my own mind, when celebrating any special occasion or anniversary, the historical basis or the folklore-based background that lies at the very roots of that festival

or celebration should always be at the very hub of the festivities and jollification of that particular day; it is specifically such matters that should be commemorated and recalled as the source of all the customs and observances of that special day. For example, the various aspects of the Passover Feast are vivid reminders linked inexorably to the events surrounding the exodus of the Israelites from their land of bondage and ill-treatment several thousand years previously; Thanksgiving day is of little moment without some knowledge of the Pilgrim Fathers, their perilous voyage from Britain and their first plentiful harvest in the New World; and so on for such religious festivals as Easter and I-Ghid.

Whether the actual historical backdrop to the millennial celebrations has indeed been focussed on and considered in any great depth as part of the many celebrations associated with this passage of time is much debatable; the progress and enlightenment of the last 2,000 years and its celebration have also left behind completely the fact that in a small hilly town in the Middle East, a joiner's son was born in poverty when his family displaced by the political whim of a Roman emperor who decided to call a census of the civilised world. As the 'beloved physician' indicates this took place 'when Quirinius was governor of Judea and Herod the tetrarch'. The birth of this boy became the fulcrum around which history has been counterpoised ever since, ideals and aspirations set, artistic expression motivated, and scientific wisdom discussed and expanded. This historical event has only been referred to in passing during the millennial celebration, and perhaps in a purely historical context it should have been better emphasised.

A quick reckoning of the many wondrous achievements of the last century documents major expansions in intellectual capabilities with vast applications of science, technology, and thought. The atom has been split to the extent that each subatomic particle has been further dissected and the search for anti-matter is well on its way. The heavens have been charted by radio-telescopes, and orbiting probes that have gone light-years further than even science fiction writers could imagine. Human organs have been repaired, transplanted and their workings explored. Medicine has obliterated pandemic diseases such as small pox and diphtheria, which have been the scourge of the world with their high mortality and morbidity, and many more can head in the same direction. The code of life has been deciphered and is being gradually manipulated.

Yet this bonanza of intellectual wealth is marred by constant strife and war, throughout the five continents, in both so-called developed and developing countries; genocide repackaged as ethnic cleansing is as rife today as it has ever been; human rights, enshrined in treaties and declarations collectively signed and subscribed to multi-nationally, are regularly and horribly flouted. The poor are still with us in very large numbers; not a day passes without

images appearing in the media of ever-lengthening rows of refugees in tears and in tatters, winding their hopeless way out of cities in which they have legitimately lived, and perhaps even prospered, with their few belongings, their shattered dreams and associations. Pictures of pot-bellied marasmic children and parents who are just as emaciated are flashed on our screens with recurrent periodicity. As the wealthier countries improve their standards of living, other nations are suffering from debts and penury, disease and deprivation; perhaps with a degree of greater effort, a subtler and more equitable use of all the resources available may help to improve the *status quo*. International co-operation and mutual aid still fall prey to mistrust, corruption, failed diplomacy, and blatant disinterest and disaffection. Political chicanery and machinations of Machiavellian proportions obliterate and vote out popular opinion.

At the very crux of further improvement in the human lot, there must certainly be education. Unfortunately, formal schooling and the dispelling of illiteracy is still far from being universal, and although the computer and the 'net' have widened horizons, and made learning and knowledge much more accessible, much more still needs to be done. In many countries, and not least in Scotland till about the turn of the century (and even later) one of the dominant figures of each community, a role model, a confidante and adviser, a community leader and an educator *par excellence*, a real cornerstone of his community, was the physician: he in turn also lived up to his title of 'doctor' and taught others. In some exceptional instances, this had gone even much further for some medical doctors, and their stethoscopes and their bedside manner have had to give way to the spin-doctoring of politics, the tannoys and

microphones of political rallies, and the mind-numbing dreariness of governmental administration. In terms of community education the physician still carries this vital role.

Endings always tend to be tinged with some sadness; the end of a millennium is no different, and is, perhaps, even more so. Every December's end tends to remind one of the final curtain when we all have to take the final bow and bid farewell to this 'mortal coil' and all its pleasures, bustle, toil, acquaintances and family. Mortality and decay are intrinsic characteristics of all organic matter, not least humankind, and thoughts of this final exit will assail us and worry us.

To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
 This sensible warm motion to become
 A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
 To bathe in fiery floods or to reside
 In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;
 to be imprison'd in the viewless winds;
 (*Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare).

One of the many aspirations of the twenty-first century human being would be increasing longevity, an increasing continuation of life in a state of replete intellectual functioning and unimpaired physical strength and ability. Although these goals may be achievable, at least to some degree, the penalty is an increase in degenerative conditions, and with changing demography and family structure, the challenge is on to ensure that any increased years are associated with adequate care, respect and usefulness, which have to be ensured by the state.