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New Year's Day and Leap Year in English History

(1) NEW YEAR'S DAY

THE number of different days on which the new year began in different countries and in different ages is almost legion.[1] Here we are only concerned with English usage and the fact that, in spite of ecclesiastical, legal, financial, municipal, and other years, the persistent conception of New Year's day has always been what we call 1 January. 'The earlier modes of reckoning', says Dr. R. L. Poole, 'are in origin pagan', beginning the year as we do just after the winter solstice; and possibly it goes back to the prehistoric times when Stonehenge was laid out to indicate, as nearly as might be, the point at which the day begins to lengthen after the winter solstice.[2] In December 1939 eight days (19th–26th) were approximately of equal length at 7 hours 46 minutes Greenwich time; the 27th and 28th were one minute longer, the 28th two minutes, the 30th three, and the 31st four. New Year's day is roughly five minutes longer than the shortest days, not a bad astronomical observation for the architects of Stonehenge, and suggestive at least of the possibility that the persistence of that beginning of the year, despite the imposition of more artificial dates, was due to the folklore of a race a good deal older than the Roman.

Julius Caesar adopted the first of January in lieu of the ancient 1 March as the first day of the year,[3] though neither he nor anyone else, before the Quakers and the French Revolutionists, succeeded in calling the last four of the twelve months anything but the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th months. He could only intercalate July, named after himself; and Augustus, not to be outdone, followed suit. The Church itself adopted the Circumcision

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[1] Cf. R. L. Poole, *ante*, xxxiii. 57, 210.

[2] Bede in *O.E.D. s.v.* 'Yule', 'De mensibus Anglorum . . . Primusque mensis eorum . . . a conversione solis in auctum diei'. Murray R. L. Beaven, *ante*, xxxiii. 328–42, contends that the Anglo-Saxon year began about 24 September. For early medieval associations of Yule with New Year, see *O.E.D. s.v.* 'New-year'.

[3] W. Smith, *Dict. of Greek and Roman Antiquites*, 1882, pp. 231–2. It is said that Roman magistrates took office on 1 January from 153 B.C.; J. S. Reid on 'Chronology', in *Companion to Latin Studies* (Cambr. Univ. Press).

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(1 January) from the Jews in place of the more natural Christmas day, and medieval almanacks were all constructed on that basis. The particular 'Christian year' begins with Advent, which is a season rather than a specific day; beginning always on the fourth Sunday before Christmas day, it may last for 28 or for only 22 days, and commence on any date between 27 November and 3 December inclusive; and that made it inconvenient for other than ecclesiastical uses.

The other ecclesiastical year, beginning on Lady day, 25 March, was a far more serious competitor as a new year's day. 'Supposed', as the 1611 Authorized Version informs us, 'to be the first day upon which the world was created', it owed its importance to the growing cult of the Virgin Mary during the middle ages.[1] Her popularity became in fact a source of chronological embarrassment, for there were seven Lady days in the medieval church calendar, falling respectively on 2 February, 25 March, 2 July, 15 August, 8 September, 21 November, and 8 December. The Lady day which outdistanced all its rivals was, of course, the 25th of March, the Annunciation, deduced by obvious reasoning from the exact nine months between that date and Christmas day; for the same reason there are exactly nine months between the Virgin's own Conception (8 December) and her Nativity (8 September). But as late as the first Tudor, 8 December is termed 'Lady day' without any qualification by a Plumpton correspondent, writing on 13 December 1485, and by the Colchester diarist of Henry VII's first parliament.[2] Kingsford[3] has 'o'r Lady day the natyvete' in 1482, Cotgrave has, in 1611, 'our Ladie-day in haruest' (15 August), and Nathaniel Bacon, the puritan historian of Ipswich, has 'Nativit. Mar.' for 8 September throughout his *Annales*[4] from 1200 to their conclusion in 1649: there are still four separate days dedicate to the Virgin Mary in the Oxford University calendar.

Nevertheless, the Annunciation naturally came to be regarded as the commencement *ab ovo* of the Christian era, and its adoption by the government for legal, financial, and other civil purposes was doubtless due to the fact that civil administration was mainly vested in clerical hands. The first law term in the year was that of Easter, beginning seventeen days after Easter on dates varying, like Easter, over a range of thirty-five days from 8 April to 12 May, lasting for twenty-seven days, and ending on dates between 4 May and 7 June. The second term was Trinity with a similar range of ecclesiastical variation. Michaelmas term,

[1] R. L. Poole, *loc. cit.* pp. 16, 18.

[2] *Plumpton Corresp.*, Camden Soc. p. 48; *Red Paper Book of Colchester*, ed. Benham, p. 64; my *Henry VII*, i. 31, n.

[3] *English Hist. Lit.* p. 381.

[4] Ed. 1884; cf. the Yarlington Fair on 8 September granted to Sir Thomas Smith in 1556 (*C.P.R.* 1555–7, pp. 413–14).

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on the other hand, began always on 9 or 10 October and ended on 28 or 29 November; and the fourth term, Hilary, always began on 23 or 24 January and ended on 12 or 13 February, these slight variations being due simply to the incidence of Sundays. Similarly, the exchequer held the first of its two sessions at Easter, and the second at Michaelmas; [1] and the end of the financial year came to be fixed at 24 March until the reform of the calendar in 1751. Popular feeling might lament the loss of eleven days, but the exchequer was firm in its resistance to the loss of eleven days' revenue; its financial year was prolonged to 5 April, and we still pay income tax on a year which runs from 6 April. The lord mayor of London and other municipal dignitaries asserted a similar privilege, and prolonged the end of their mayoralties from 28 October to 9 November.

But these are only dates within the year and, so to speak, domestic to the year. The chronological reticence of the Evangelists precluded the use of 'anno Domini' or general chronology for specific legal, administrative, or financial transactions. In that sphere the king has remained supreme since the reign of Henry II, and acts of parliament are still dated by the years of the reign in which they are passed, though during the Commonwealth, when there was no king, public documents were simply dated by the 'anno Domini,' the month, and the day of the month. There are not sufficient records to determine the commencement of William I's regnal years, and his reign has been variously dated from the death of Edward the Confessor (5 January 1066), the battle of Hastings (14 October 1066), and William's coronation (25 December 1066); and public records are not dated by regnal years till the reign of Henry II.[2] Thenceforward, except for the Commonwealth period, dating by regnal years becomes the rule for official public documents; and the facts that no reign has begun on 1 January and that only two of the thirty-nine sovereigns since the battle of Hastings—viz. Richard III and William IV—began to reign on the same day (26 June), show that we require thirty-nine [3] different chronological tables, none of them corresponding with a year beginning on 1 January. That was sufficient to rule out any idea of a regnal year competing for New Year's day. Nevertheless, the regnal year remained the chronological framework for all royal records—curia regis rolls, parliament rolls, statute rolls, patent rolls, close rolls, fine rolls, inquisitions *post mortem*, and so forth.

[1] *Dialogus de Scaccario*, ed. Crump, Hughes, and Johnson, pp. 115-16; R. L. Poole, *The Exchequer in the 12th Century*, pp. 137–43.

[2] E. A. Fry, *Almanacks*, p. 108, n.

[3] Separate tables were required for Richard III and William IV because 26 June 1483 fell on a Thursday, and 26 June 1830 on a Saturday.

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Obviously, however, the successive reigns, all beginning on different days of the month and week (till 26 June 1830), required correlation to bind them into a single chronological series; and the main difficulty concerned the date of its commencement. The countries of Europe offered a bewildering variety, differing not only between themselves but in the same country at different times. The choice lay, as a rule, between Christmas day, 1 January, 25 March, and Easter. 'In the latter part of the thirteenth century', remarks Dr. R. L. Poole,[1] 'the Christmas style was more and more commonly used by the Popes, and in 1310 a council at Cologne ordered its adoption.' But 'the Church steadily opposed the observance of 1 January as the beginning of the year', though 'that date was . . . accepted for calendar purposes, and the Golden Number and the Sunday Letter were reckoned from it. . . . This was perhaps partly due to an increasing use of almanacks which were naturally constructed from 1 January. Probably it was also influenced by the study of Roman law.' These influences, aided perhaps by the number of competing dates for New Year's day, produced towards the middle of the thirteenth century what Dr. Poole describes as 'definite symptoms of a return to the ancient pagan system'. The almanacks would surely be as much a symptom as a cause, and it might almost seem that age-long memories of humble folk were beginning, not only to produce jacquerie and peasant revolts, but to revive prehistoric notions of chronology. As late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries surprising instances occurred of agricultural labourers recovering property in land and reverting to ancient methods of its cultivation.

It is at least difficult to discover in English history and literature any description of 25 March or any other date than 1 January as being New Year's day. The opposition of the Church to its observance was no doubt due to the Jewish origin of the rite of circumcision performed on the eighth day after birth, and its acceptance of the date for calendar purposes was presumably a concession to convenience and the usage of the almanacks. Henry III extorted New Year's gifts from London early in January 1249,[2] and subsequent sovereigns followed the practice of giving and receiving New Year's presents on 1 January until the Puritan revolution intervened. Edward I's ordinance about the bi-sextile day in leap year depends upon the year beginning on 1 January, and Maitland's calendar for the 1305 parliament assumes that the year we call 1303/4 was a leap year and began

[1] R. L. Poole, 'The Beginning of the Year in the Middle Ages' (*Proc. British Academy*, x. 24).

[2] Matthew Paris, *Hist. Angl.* (Rolls Ser.), v. 39–40; Gasquet, *Henry III*, pp. 279–80.

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on 1 January.[1] Wylie has collected a number of New Year's gifts made on 1 January and succeeding days during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, including £104 18*s.* 2*d.* by John of Gaunt 'die circumcisionis', and the 'year-gifts' which Richard II's second queen, Isabella, 'received from her relatives in France as usual' on New Year's day 1400.[2] 'On the morn after newe yeres-day', writes John Bale the London chronicler, 'came hevy word and tidings' of the battle of Wakefield fought on 30 December 1460.[3] On 6 January 1456 a Paston letter refers to 'the god chiere . . . had here uppon New Yeer Day'.[4] Bentley's 'Excerpta Historica' prints a list of Henry VI's New Year's gifts in 1437, including one to his mother, Catherine of Valois, who died on 3 January; and on 4 January 1495 he records Henry VII's payment of £120 for 'newyeryefts'.[5] Skelton, in his New Year's dream for 1522,[6]

> . . . saw Ianus, with his double chere,
> Makying his almanak for the new yere;
> . . . .
> Good luk this new yere! the olde yere is past.

The minute and voluminous *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII* afford overwhelming evidence that New Year's day was 1 January and no other day. On 5 January 1511 an official record states that 'On New Year's day, Wednesday, Dominical letter E, 1 Jan. about —— (*blank*) a.m., 2 Hen. VIII at Richmond in Sowthrey, was born Prince Henry, whose christening was deferred till Sunday, 5 Jan.'. On 8 January his mother announced the fact to Margaret of Savoy with the addition that Margaret was godmother, and on the 15th the Venetian ambassador conveyed the same information.[7] On 1 January 1513 is a list of the king's New Year gifts costing £212 11*s.* 10½*d.*; and Erasmus presents John Yonge, master of the rolls, with a translation from Plutarch, sending another to Wolsey on 4 January 1514. On 1 January 1516 [8] Sir Robert Wingfield writes of it as 'the first day of the new year', Erasmus acknowledges a present from Sir Thomas More, and Henry VIII on 5 January one from the marquis of Mantua. On 1 January 1517 Clarencieux king-at-arms sends a

[1] *Memoranda de Parliamento* (Rolls Ser.) p. xciv. His parliament was that of 28 February 1304/5, opened on a Sunday followed by Ash Wednesday on 3 March, and preceded by St. Mathias on 24 February, which leaves no room for a bi-sextile day; and if 1304/5 was not a leap year, 1303/4 must have been one (E. A. Fry, tables 8 and 28).

[2] *Henry IV*, iii. 218, 259, 328; iv. 66, n., 165–6, 170, 173, 264, 284.

[3] In Flenley's *Six Town Chronicles*, 1911, p. 152.

[4] *Paston Letters*, ed. Gairdner, 1904, i. 368–9.

[5] Pp. 100, 120, 148–50.

[6] *Works*, ed. Dyce, i. 421.

[7] *L.P. Henry VIII*, i. (ed. 1920), 670, 673, 675.

[8] *Ibid.* II, i. 1549, 1550, 2258; ii. 1377–8, 1382, and note on 1515.

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letter 'written at Edinburgh this New Year's day at night and delivered to Robert Kerres the second day of January'; and the duke of Albany and the archbishop of Glasgow write letters with the same date dealing with the same matter.[1] On 2 January Erasmus presents Henry VIII with more Plutarch and his *Institutio Christiani Principis*.[2] Their own works were authors' favourite New Year's gifts to kings or influential ministers. Sir Thomas Elyot sends to Thomas Cromwell a treatise of 'the knowledge which maketh a wise man' in 1533; [3] Leland presents his *Antiquities* to Henry VIII 'as a new yeares gyfte in the xxxvii yeare of his reygne' (1547); [4] and Ascham designed his *Scolemaster* as 'a new year's gift that Christmas' for Elizabeth in 1563.[5]

Some of the items in the royal New Year's gifts have another than chronological interest. Henry VIII's list for 1 January 1528 [6] begins with gifts to Wolsey and Warham, the dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, and 'thirty-three noble ladies and ten mistresses', the last item of which has been absurdly given a sinister meaning. On 30 December 1530 we have 'paied to my lady Anne [Boleyn] by the kinges commandment towards hir new yeares gifte, c li'. An entry on 25 March 1531 runs 'paid to the pages of the king's chamber in rewarde for newe yeres daye and forgotten'; next year they were paid on 9 January.[7] On 3 January 1533 Chapuys describes Charles V's letters to Queen Catherine, which he had received on 31 December, as 'the most agreeable New Year's present she could have'.[8] On 1 January 1535 three correspondents of Lord Lisle date letters '1 Jan. 1534'—either a slip or a deliberate practice like Pepys' of styling 1 January New Year's day while continuing the old year till 24 March.[9] On 3 January 1536 Sir Robert Dormer wishes Richard Cromwell 'a good new year and a many', and other correspondents show that Richard's uncle Thomas was reaping an increasing harvest of New Year gifts.[10] The first item in 1538 is a list of 'persons to be had at this time in the king's most benign remembrance', and is notable as containing no bishops, but 'the

[1] *Letters and Papers*, ii. nos. 2741–3.

[2] *Ibid.* no. 3864; cf. iii. 1930; the king's book of payments from 1519–21, *ibid.* pp. 1533–47, contains similar entries beginning 'Saturday, New Year's Day, anno 10' (cf. Fry, *Almanacks*, table 34), which is followed (p. 1535) by 'half year's wages due Lady Day, a° 10'.

[3] *L.P.* 1533, no. 1.

[4] *Ibid.* 1546, no. 1; cf. *ibid.* no. 4.

[5] *Works*, ed. Giles, iv. 84.

[6] *L.P.* iv. 1672.

[7] Nicolas, *Privy Purse Exp. of Henry VIII*, pp. 101, 119, 187. For a list of the New Year's gifts by and to the king on 1 January 1532, see *L.P.* v. 327–9.

[8] *Ibid.* vi. no. 19; cf. nos. 6–10 and vii. (1534), nos. 9–10 and 11, where Christopher Hales' letter is dated 'the Circumcision'.

[9] *Ibid.* viii. 6; cf. 14, 15; for Pepys' practice see below, p. 184.

[10] *Ibid.* x. 2–4, 13, 20.

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widows and orphans of the persons attainted '.[1] On 1 January 1539 we have a list of New Year's gifts to the infant prince Edward, including a coat of crimson satin from his sister Mary, and 'a shirt of cambric of her own working' from his sister Elizabeth (aged 5).[2] There are nearly fifty items in Madden's *Privy Purse Expenses of Princess Mary* [3] confirming the use of 'New Year's day' for 1 January, and John Gough Nichols' volume on Edward VI,[4] and John Nichols' 'Progresses' of Queen Elizabeth [5] and James I [6] continue to illustrate the practice. So do household books like those of the earls of Northumberland, which prescribe, for instance, sixteen laundry dates a year for the various kinds of linen required for service in their magnificent chapel. Their year begins, like sheriffs' accounts, at Michaelmas, and the succeeding dates are 'Alhallowmes', 'Cristymmes', 'New Yer Evyn', 'xiith Evyn' 'Candilmas Evyn', 'Shraft Evyn', 'our Lady Day in Lent', etc.[7]

Nevertheless, there remained a good deal of hesitation and confusion due to the conflicting system which began the year on Lady day, 25 March. I have failed to find a single instance of that day being actually described as New Year's day, but sixteenth-century chroniclers seem also to have been shy of calling 1 January New Year's day. Machyn has, I think, only one reference to 'nuwyerevyn' (p. 162). Wriothesley has, in his description of Anne of Cleves' arrival on 31 December 1539, a clear statement that she tarried at Rochester 'that night and Newe Yeares daie all daie', and was met 'at afternoune' by the king in disguise, who 'showed her a token that the king had sent her for her Newe Yeares gift'. But Wriothesley also speaks of '27 Feb. Leape Yeare, A.D. 1535', and regularly continues his numeral years till 25 March (i. 34; ii. 7, 10, 31, 65, 81). Even Sir Bryan Tuke, the treasurer of Henry VIII's chamber, was not always clear in his accounts. He had been appointed on 13 April 1528, his reckonings commence on 1 October, and his 'paymentes in January' begin with 'rewardes geven on Wednes-daye, new yeres day, at Grenewich, anno xx^{mo}'. But New Year's day 1529 did not fall on a Wednesday; that New Year's day in Henry VIII's twentieth regnal year (22 April 1528–21 April 1529) skipped Thursday because 1528 had been a leap year; it had fallen on Wednesday on 1 January 1528, but fell on Friday 1 January 1529. Tuke gives New Year's day correctly as Saturday on 1 January 1530, but on 1 January 1531 omits both

[1] *L.P.* 1538, i. 1. [2] *Ibid.* 1539, i. 5; cf. 1540, no. 1. [3] Ed. 1831.
[4] *Literary Remains*, pp. cccxi–xviii (Roxburghe Club, 1857–8).
[5] 4 vols. 1788–1821, new ed. 1823.
[6] 4 vols. 1828. [7] Ed. 1905, pp. 231–3.

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the day of the month and the day of the week, prudently dating simply 'Newyers Day'.[1]

The more scattered materials for succeeding reigns confirm in less detail the general conclusion that New Year's day was always 1 January. On 3 January 1583/4 Roger Manners informs the earl of Rutland that 'upon New Years day sudenly my Lord Howard was made Lord Chamberlayn, my Lord of Hundesdon capitayn of the pentioners', &c.[2] On 1 January 1590 a correspondent 'sends New Year's Greetings' to the clerk of the council; on 1 January 1598 a soldier remarks that 'this is the time for New Year's gifts' and sends Robert Cecil 'a true register of a soldier's pilgrimage';[3] on 1 January 1599 Essex writes to his cousin Fulk Greville about 'this time of general offerings'; and on 1 January 1602 Sir Robert Dudley tells Cecil he is 'bold to observe this compliment of fashionable custom, and present your Honour this New Year's Day with an ambling gelding'. It seems in fact to have been the general, if not invariable, custom to carry on the old year to 24 March while observing 1 January as New Year's day. The *Lords'* and *Commons' Journals* do so; Robert Bowyer's parliamentary *Diary*[4] continues to call the year '1605' till 24 March, and begins 1606 with the 25th; and D'Ewes' journal of the Long parliament, which began on 3 November 1640, has 'Friday, January 1 being Newyears-day, 1640', yet continues to call the year '1640' till his journal ends on 20 March.[5] Oliver Cromwell's letters, Evelyn's *Diary*, Reresby's *Memoirs*, and Pepys all observe the same illogical convention.

Pepys' practice is the most obtrusive because of its minute regularity. Every year he notes its end on 31 December and beginning on 1 January, and yet continues to call it by the old date until 25 March, making no comment on the latter date. Thus, on 31 December 1662, he writes, 'Thus ends this year with great mirth to me and my wife', but on 24 March 1662/3 has no allusion to any change except the day of the month. On 1 January 1663/4 he receives 'the best New Year's gift that ever I had', but 25 March is simply Lady day, though Pepys reports at some length the sermon he went up to hear in Whitehall. That year (1664) 'ends, I bless God, with great joy to me', and on 31 December he counts up his blessings in worldly

[1] Tuke's accounts as treasurer of the chamber were printed for the Camden Society in 1857 from a manuscript volume in the possession of the Trevelyan family. They were afterwards presented by Sir W. C. Trevelyan to the P.R.O. and Tuke's accounts were summarized by Gairdner in vol. v. of the *Letters and Papers* (pp. 303–26); Gairdner corrects Tuke's mistake on p. 307.

[2] Rutland MSS. (Hist. MSS. Comm.), i. 157.

[3] Hatfield (Salisbury) MSS. iv. 1; viii. 1; ix. 4; xii. 1.

[4] Ed. D. H. Willson, 1931, pp. 90–1.

[5] Ed. Wallace Notestein, 1923.

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goods, bodily health, and household comforts. That is his real day of reckoning; Lady day is no more than a saint's day.[1]

His Quaker contemporary, George Fox, was more conservative. He went back to the ancient year of Romulus; and to him 25 March was the first day of the year and March was the first month, January the eleventh, and February the twelfth. His antagonism was, somewhat illogically, to the paganism embedded in the Christian year: all its months and all its days of the week were of pagan origin; and, while his purely numerical designations of months and days of the week were neutral, he began with the Christian Annunciation. It first occurs apparently in his *Journal* in a letter sent to him dated '22d of the 4th Month, 1662', but Fox was using 'First-day morning' for Sunday morning before that; and before his *Journal* ends we have 'the 10th of the 11th Month' or similar dates on nearly every page. But this Quaker practice succumbed to the act of 1751 so far as the order of months and beginning of the year were concerned. January became the '1st Month' and it began on the 1st day of the year, but the months and the days of the week retained their numerical nomenclature.[2] That act of 1751 had a revolutionary effect on another chronological problem which troubles historians.

(2) LEAP YEAR

The problem of the beginning and ending of leap year exercises the compilers of chronological tables designed for historical students as well as for more numerous and ordinary users. Leap year owes its invention to Julius Caesar, whose astronomical advisers had realized that the year consisted of approximately 365 days and six hours, and that an extra day was required every fourth year to keep the calendar in order. Sixteen centuries later it was realized that this was too much, and the Gregorian reform reduced the intercalation by three days in every four centuries, eliminating leap years from all centennial years like 1400, 1500, 1700, 1800, and 1900, in which the number of the century was not itself divisible by four. But even the most refined mathematics fail to impose exactitude on nature; and in the nineteenth century it was proposed by the French astronomer Delambre that the years 3600, 7200, 10,800 and all multiples of 3600 should not be leap years, because the discrepancy in the Gregorian year would amount to one day in each 3600 years.[3]

[1] H. B. Wheatley, *Pepys' Diary*, ed. 1923, i. 1, notes his practice and remarks that 'the 1st of January was considered as New Year's day long before Pepys' time'.

[2] Nicolas, *Chronology of History*, 2nd ed. pp. 180–1.

[3] William Smith, *Dict. of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. 1882, p. 231.

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The old Roman year began with March, a fact that is still enshrined in our calendar, which names the last four months of our twelve-month year the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth; and Julius Caesar naturally intercalated his extra day for leap year towards its end in February, the last month of the old Roman year. That date for intercalation unhappily survived Caesar's other astronomical reform, the removal of New Year's day from 1 March to 1 January, and produced much of the chronological ambiguity with which we are now concerned. The bi-sextile, bissextile,[1] or leap year day had obscurities enough of its own. Why, for instance, should it have been fixed at six days before the first or Calends of March instead of 'pridie Kal. Mar.', the last day of February? It was suggested by Herodotus that these five intervening days over and above the 360 days had been considered by the Egyptians as extraneous days not belonging to any year and not placed in any month; and the Roman soldier is said to have been paid for only 360 days in a year's service.

However that may have been, the bi-sextile day was the sixth day, counted backwards according to the Roman system, from 1 March; it fell on 24 February, which was counted twice. But there were obvious disadvantages in having two days of the week on one day of the month, though no doubt it produced the well-known surname of Doubleday; and the Romans adopted the practice of differentiating the two by calling 24 February the 'posterior' bi-sextile day, and the 25th the 'prior' bi-sextile day, the 24th being behind, in their backward reckoning, the 25th day. This Roman practice was meticulously followed by John Seymour, the clerk of the commons in February 1552 when, after the heading 'Mercurii, 24° Februarii' in his journal, he has 'Jovis, quoque 24° pr'[2] dies bisext.'

No doubt he had before him Edward I's ordinance of 1278 requiring the 'dies excrescens in anno bisextili'[3] to be observed in the month and year 'in quo excrescit', and 'computetur dies ille et proximo precedens pro unico die'. Here Edward appears to be less classical than Seymour in regarding the 'dies excrescens'

[1] 'Bis-sextilis' was the Roman spelling, but Edward I's ordinance on the subject has 'bisextilis', Caxton has 'bysext', the under-clerk of parliament has 'bisextilis' in 1552, and all the words in the *O.E.D.*—except 'biscuit', which is French—which mean 'double' or 'twofold', have 'bi-' and not 'bis' to express their meaning, e.g. bi-cameral, bi-centenary, biceps, bicycle, biennial, bifurcate, bigamy, bi-lateral, bi-lingual, bi-metallism, bi-nomial, bi-plane, bisect, bi-valve. Trevisa, Sir Thomas Elyot, and Edmund Spenser also spell 'bisext' with a single 's', and it would seem that the double 's' only crept into English when the word had become what the *O.E.D.* calls obsolete.

[2] *Commons' Journals*, i. 18*b*; the printed text has 'q', which seems meaningless. The careless printing of these journals is illustrated by the fact that this session of 1552 appears for the most part under the heading of '1549'.

[3] Bede is said to have been the earliest writer in England to use the term 'annus bissextilis'.

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as preceding the 'posterior' day of the Roman calendar. But it was natural enough for an English king to prefer the forward to the backward reckoning of Rome. The month in which it fell is clear enough; the year is more ambiguous. Edward's ordinance only survives in Hale's transcript, where it is placed under 6 Edward I. That year ran from November 1277 to November 1278, and there was no leap year between 1276 and 1280 to give the matter the urgency suggested by its terms. Apart from this uncertainty is the question whether it applied to a year which, for its first two months, might be 1279/80 or 1280/1. In Seymour's journal the bi-sextile day occurs in the February of a year which he called 1551, but we call 1552; a leap year was not always or all of it divisible by four; and indeed the bi-sextile day in England always, until 1752, fell towards the end of a year which was not divisible by four.

William de Ayreminne who, as he tells us, was specially deputed for the task, provides the most careful and meticulous chronological account of a medieval parliament in his roll for that of 1315/6 held at Lincoln. It had been summoned for Tuesday and met on Wednesday the morrow of the quindene of St. Hilary, i.e. 28 January 1315,[1] old style, and 1316, new style; and Ayreminne continues to give a wealth of consistent and continuous dates. But in the previous year, 1314/15, the corresponding morrow of the quindene of St. Hilary had fallen on Tuesday, and there had been no intercalated day between the two dates. The parliament ended on 20 February [2] before the bi-sextile day. Why then call the year a leap year?

The same problem arises with regard to two of the latest parliaments in the printed *Rotuli Parliamentorum*. Richard III's solitary parliament met on Friday, 23 January, and was dissolved on Friday, 20 February 1483/4. Here again there intervened no bi-sextile day between 23 January 1482/3 and 23 January 1483/4. In 1482/3 the 23rd of January fell on Thursday, and in 1483/4 on Friday, with no intercalated day. In the same way Henry VII's last parliament met on Thursday, 25 January 1503/4; but 25 January 1502/3 had fallen on Wednesday, and no bi-sextile day had intervened to justify the placing of these parliaments in 'leap' years. Nevertheless, although it seems absurd, all these dates are correct. Edward II's 1316 parliament did meet on Wednesday, 28 January 1315/16; Richard III's parliament met on Friday, 23 January 1483/4, and Henry VII's last on Thursday, 25 January 1503/4. But, before attempting an explanation, it may be well to trace the vagaries of the bi-sextile day.

[1] *Lords' Rep. on Dignity of a Peer*, iii. 252; *Rot. Parl.* i. 350.

[2] This is the date on which the Commons made their grant and received their writs *de expensis*; but Ayreminne's roll goes on with proceedings 'in parliamento' till 24 February.

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Etymologically it is the double sixth day before the Calends of March, i.e. 24–25 February. But in spite of Edward I's ordinance and Seymour's meticulous observance thereof as late as 1552, it is clear that the bi-sextile day had in common usage lost its etymological meaning. It might even seem that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, having cast loose from its etymological moorings, it drifted up and down through February, and even occasionally into January. As early as 1352 we find a chancery clerk dating an item on the close roll '29 February'; [1] yet exactly two centuries later Seymour adorns his Commons' journal with precise repetition of the Roman style. In the interval we find on the patent, close, or 'fine' rolls 29 February in 1376, 1380,[2] 1401,[3] 1404,[4] 1406,[5] 1408,[6] 1472 (thrice),[7] 1481,[8] and 1484 (twice); [9] and it looks as though the bi-sextile day were settling down on its unetymological date of 'pridie Kal. Martii'. But the fact that we find it in 1401 and 1406 as well as in 1404, and in 1481 as well as in 1484, not to mention Seymour's classical reaction, indicates a good deal of chronological hesitation. That is confirmed by still stranger aberrations: in 1393 we have '30 February', and again three times in 1484 (in addition to a 29 February), and once in 1508 [10] without a 29 February. Even more extraordinary are the '33 February' in 1493, the '32 January' in 1388, and the '33 January' in 1473.[11] In 1512 we have a 29 February for leap year,[12] but later in Henry VIII's reign there is a distinct but natural tendency to take refuge in the ambiguous 'ultimo'. How far Seymour's reaction was representative I do not know; but in the whole of the patent rolls, from Edward VI's accession down to the end (1560) of the latest published volume of the calendar, I have not found a single 29 February.[13] Many of the patents are undated and some

[1] *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1349–54, p. 468; Mr. Pugh of the P.R.O. kindly verified this dating on the original roll.

[2] *Ibid.* 1374–7, p. 301; 1377–81, p. 361, as in 1352.

[3] *Ibid.* 1399–1402, pp. 54, 60 (in 1400), 246 (in 1401).

[4] *Ibid.* 1402–5, pp. 252, 313 (both in 1404).

[5] *Ibid.* 1405–9, p. 97, although not a leap year.

[6] *Ibid.* p. 374.

[7] *C.P.R.* 1467–77, pp. 307, 309, 312 (leap year, 1472).

[8] *Ibid.* 1476–85, p. 242.

[9] *Ibid.* pp. 377, 422.

[10] *Ibid.* p. 456. In *C.C.R.* 1392–6, *anno* 1393, we have 25 February twice, 27 twice, 28 twice, 29 once, and 30 once (pp. 37, 45–6, 122–3, and 127), and these dates fall on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday (25–8 February), and Saturday and Sunday, called 29 and 30 February, but really 1 and 2 March (Fry, table 16).

[11] *C.P.R.* 1485–94, p. 422; 1385–9, p. 417; 1467–77, p. 326. Most of these anomalies in the Calendars have an editorial [*sic*], but some have not.

[12] *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, i. 1075; in *ibid.* ii. 1603 the editor's '29 February' is only an inference from the Emperor Maximilian's 'ultima die Februarii'.

[13] Certainly there are none in 1548 or 1552, though in neither of those two years did 29 February fall on a Sunday, which might have explained the absence of patents dated 29 February. It almost suggests the chancery clerks adopted John Seymour's return to the classical bi-sextile day. The clerks of the privy council seem also to have been shy about 29 February.

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omit either the day of the month or the month itself; but the only positive anomalies I have noted are the '31' November 1547 and a patent dated 25 December.[1]

Other official records exhibit a similar discrepancy. Lord Chancellor Audley dates a letter in 1536 with a quite unambiguous '29 Feb.'; [2] but Richard Morison [3] writing from Venice has the less explicit 'prid. Cal. Martias' [*sic*], and Charles V, writing from Naples, has 'the last day of Feb. 1536', which the editor assumes to have been the 29th. The 'Lords' Journal' for 1543/4 has a prorogation from Saturday, 23 February to Thursday next (28 February) which it describes as 'videlicet ultimo Febr.' It then twice describes Friday as the first day of March. The editor, taking some liberty, corrects these errors in the text and reduces the text to footnotes; but he has no comment on the fact that the journal makes Saturday also 1 March, treating it obviously, but ungrammatically, as the bi-sextile day.[4] In 1551/2 the new clerk of the lords also ignores the etymological bi-sextile day and has Tuesday 23, Wednesday 24, Thursday 25, Friday 26, and Saturday 27 February. He has then an adjournment to Thursday, 3 March. So, unlike his colleague in the Commons, he abstains from a bi-sextile 24 February, while an adjournment makes it doubtful whether he visualized a 29 February or a 'bi-sextile' 1 March like his predecessor in 1543/4.

The dating in the 'Acts of the Privy Council' [5] is very imperfect, but its 'Sundaye the xxvjth of February, 1547/8' and 'Sundaye, the iiijth of Marche' implies a Wednesday 29 February more probably than a 'bi-sextile' 1 March. In 1551/2 'the xxviijth of February, 1551' is followed three pages later by 'the laste of February, 1551'; but in 1555/6 'the 28 February' is immediately followed by 'the firste of March'. The register of the following leap years is wanting or obscure until 1572 when it has '29 February'; and thenceforward, although the fact has often to be inferred, 29 February seems established as the rule for leap year day. It obtains in the calendars of State Papers for the period; in the Domestic series I have found '29 February' in 1548, 1568, and 1572; and in the Foreign series in 1556, 1560 (thrice), 1564 (twice), and 1580 (four times).[6] The *O.E.D.* describes the word 'bis-sextile' as 'obsolete', and we may conclude

[1] *C.P.R.* Edw. VI, i. 95; 1557–8, p. 296. There is also a '31 November' in the *Cal. Fine Rolls*, 1437–45, p. 284, and a 25 December in 1407 (*C.C.R.* 1405–9, p. 302).

[2] *L.P. Hen. VIII*, x. 370, 372–3.

[3] *D.N.B.*

[4] *Lords' Journals*, i. 251–2; the clerk was Thomas Knight (*d.* 1550), who was succeeded by Francis Spilman, who continued to act till he was succeeded in 1574 by Anthony Mason (*d.* 1597). On Saturday, 16 February 1543/4 Knight discontinued the medieval custom of reckoning by '*dies Parliamenti*'.

[5] I have given a list, with dates, of its clerks, *ante*, xxxviii. 56–7.

[6] The calendars of state papers are, unlike those of patent and close rolls, arranged in strict chronological order.

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that it became so during the latter half of the sixteenth century, the process having taken at least two hundred years since a chancery clerk dated a document '29 February' in 1351/2.

The confusion which still exists with regard to 'leap years' before the reform of the calendar is due to the facts that (*a*) the transference of the year's beginning from 25 March to 1 January 1752 brought the 'bi-sextile' day—whether 25 or 29 February—into years divisible by four, and out of years which were not; and (*b*) the range of the 'leap' does not coincide with that of any other year—ecclesiastical, legal, or financial—either according to the old style or the new. Nor does it begin on the first day of any month, and chronology would have been much simpler if Caesar had placed the 366th day of every fourth year on 31 December. As it is, leap year is so called simply 'because one day of the week is leaped over'; [1] and the effect of that leap extends from 29 February, the day of the leap, in one year *anno domini*, until 28 February in the next. The 'leap' year therefore consists of parts of two years as we reckon them, the first part including ten months in one year, and the second two months in the next year. So the days of the week in January and February in what is now called a 'leap' year are not affected by the 'leap'; *per contra*, the days in the following January and February are affected, although they do not fall within what we call a 'leap' year. A topical example may be useful: 28 February 1939 fell on a Tuesday; it falls on Wednesday in 1940, and there will have been no 'leap', although we call 1940 a leap year. On the other hand, 28 February 1941 falls on Friday, leaping over Thursday, although we do not call 1941 a leap year.

This is the explanation of the chronology of the three parliaments of 1315/16, 1483/4, and 1503/4, with which I have dealt above. It bears upon the chronology of all English parliaments, meeting in January or February, down to the reform of the English calendar in 1751/2. The point is of special interest to historical students who avail themselves of Mr. E. A. Fry's invaluable *Almanacks for Students of English History*, published in 1915. Its ingenuity and accuracy are somewhat obscured by the excessive restraint of its modest preface, and many students have failed to understand why his 'Tables' number thirty-five and why they are arranged in their particular order. They begin, in fact, with the years in which the crucial Easter falls on the earliest possible date and continue in regular order until those years in which it falls on the latest possible date; and their number 35 therefore automatically registers the maximum range of Easter day from 22 March to 25 April, and the consequent

[1] T. Hearne, *Ductor Historicus* (1714), i. 3.

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range of Whitsunday from 10 May to 13 June, not to mention others. The intelligent student can also discover that 29 February falls on a Sunday in every 7th table in Mr. Fry's *Almanacks*, i.e. 7, 14, 21, 28, 35, and that, if he finds a public document dated 29 February in those years, it means a Sunday and is, after 1320, probably an error.[1]

The difficulty that confronts the student arises from the fact that the years in these 'Tables', which are arranged as leap years in two special columns headed 'Leap-years' and distinguished by heavy type from ordinary years, are years *anno domini* beginning with 1 January and ending on 31 December. They are, of course, years in which a 'leap' was made; but they do not correspond with leap years, which began on the bi-sextile day or 29 February and lasted for 366 days until the end of February in the following *anno domini*. I remarked above that the dates of the three parliaments I discussed are correct; but they are correct because those dates occurred, not in *anno domini* leap years, but in months of years before the 'leap' began to take effect or the year became divisible by four. Thus the date of the 1315/16 parliament appears in the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* as 1315, that of 1483/4 as beginning on 23 January 1483, and that of 1503/4 on 25 January 1503. Yet these dates appear in Mr. Fry's two special columns headed 'Leap Years', though the 'leap' did not begin to take effect till after these parliaments had ended.

The proof of this is simple, and the chronology of the parliaments of 1483/4 and 1503/4 tells exactly the same tale as Ayreminne's in 1315/16. That of 1483/4 met on Friday 23 January, but in 1482/3 the 23rd of January had fallen on Thursday, and there had been no intervening 'leap'. It was not until January 1484/5 that we find 23 January 'leaping' from Friday to Sunday. Similarly, the 1503/4 parliament began on Thursday, 25 January, but in 1502/3 the 25 January had fallen on Wednesday, and it is not until 25 January 1504/5 that we find it 'leaping' from Thursday to Saturday. Not one of these three parliaments was

[1] 'The observance of Sunday as a holiday dates from the chancellorship of John Salmon, bishop of Norwich, under whom it was introduced in the spring of 1320. But some of his successors sanctioned sealing on Sundays, when they could attend to it' (Maxwell-Lyte, *The Great Seal*, p. 296). None of the '29 February' dates mentioned above fell on a Sunday, except the two in 1484, though in 1406 29 February would have been a Sunday if the year had been a leap year. There was a growing tendency in the fifteenth century to assimilate Sunday and the Sabbath (*Rot. Parl.*, v. 152; Bale's *Chronicle*, ed. Flenley, p. 117; Kingsford, *Chronicles of London*, p. 156). Richard III's two Sunday patents may indicate indifference, but it would require an identification of all the monthly and yearly dates in the P.R.O. calendars with days of the week to establish any generalization. Such an identification with the help of Fry's 'Tables' would be laborious but not impossible, and it might throw light upon the social habits of the later middle ages. It might also help to determine when parliaments ceased to sit on Sundays, a rule not yet applied to privy councils.

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affected by the chronology of a leap year, yet the dates on which they met all appear in Mr. Fry's special columns headed 'Leap Years'. Those dates are correct, not because they were parts of leap years, but because they were not, and were necessarily unaffected by a bi-sextile day which did not fall till later. Possibly it might have been less open to misunderstanding if the two leap year columns in Mr. Fry's 'Tables' had followed, instead of preceding, the columns for ordinary years, since the effect of the bi-sextile day runs from 29 February in one year to 28 February in the next, and not from 1 January to 31 December. But it passes the wit of man to construct chronological tables which will make clear in a single scheme the many variations in the methods of computation, and our modern historical and legal works are replete with dates which are inconsistent with modern methods of reckoning.

The lawyers are most conservative, and legal textbooks and histories habitually cite cases without any regard to the reform of the calendar in 1751. Historians have, indeed, corrected in the light of that reform the years in which Queen Elizabeth died, Charles I was executed, William III died, and Anne succeeded. But they have not ventured on the task of correcting the days on which or the months in which those events took place, in the light of the superfluous leap years which accrued in centennial years not divisible by four.[1] Yet days are sometimes a matter of moment; in August 1914 a leading German newspaper published the Russian general mobilization order under its correct Russian date, and had no difficulty in showing that it was earlier than the German date of the German mobilization. The editor may have been innocently ignorant of the fact that Russia had not yet reformed its calendar, which was therefore thirteen days behind the German; and a Russian order issued on the same apparent date as the German would really be thirteen days later. Even in England the difference between the old and the new styles

[1] Thus we now say that Elizabeth died on 24 March 1603; that was to contemporaries '1602', the last day of that year. We have corrected that, but not the ten days' error in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nor the eleven days' error in the eighteenth (down to 1752). If we were logical, we should say that Elizabeth died on 3 April 1603 instead of 24 March; that Charles I was executed on 9 February instead of on 30 January; and William III died on 19 instead of 8 March. The year-dates in the two later cases were, of course, to contemporaries 1648 and 1701 instead of 1649 and 1702. In 1927 the Royal Society itself made a similar error in commemorating the bi-centenary of Sir Isaac Newton's death; and in 1936 the Historical Association, in its pamphlet no. 101, fell into the same trap in dealing with the union of England and Wales in 1536. Referring to an act cited as '27 Hen. VIII, c. 5', it is said to contain 'germs of the much more remarkable statute of 1536'; and a prefatory note in italics warns readers that '*in recent years a practice has arisen of ascribing the act to the year* 1535. *This should be corrected.*' Yet both acts were chapters of the statute of the same parliament which met on 4 February 1535/6 and sat till 14 April. The practice of dating it '1535', so far from 'arising in recent years', is a relic of the old style reformed in 1751.

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is not always appreciated, and a historical member of Lord Phillimore's Committee, appointed by Lord Balfour to report on the various projects for a League of Nations in 1918, produced an account of the Holy Alliance of 1815, in which it was said to have been signed on 14 September and proclaimed on the 26th ; and he vouched for his statement a volume by another historian which told the same tale. The volume of the State Papers containing the document was produced at the Foreign Office, and the date was found to read $\frac{14}{26}$ September, Russia using the old style and the two other participants the new, and twelve days being then the difference between them. The chairman, being a lawyer, thought it did not matter, and the Committee's published Report reduced both dates to a vague but simple September.

A. F. POLLARD.

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