

# MIONNA NA BLIANA: The Months of the Year

by Emrys Evans

The English names for the months of the year derive, without exception, ultimately from Latin, as for instance January (Januarius), April (Aprilis), August (Augustus) and so on. This is not the case with the Irish (nor for that matter, the Welsh) names for the months. In Irish we find that only six of the 'official' names are from Latin: these are **Eanáir**, **Feabhra**, **Márta**, **Aibreán**, **Iúl**, and **Nollaig**. The other six are of native Irish origin: **Bealtaine**, **Meitheamh**, **Lúnasa**, **Meán Fómhair**, **Deireadh Fómhair** and **Samhain**. Moreover, three of these, as we shall find later on, are the names of three of the great pre-Christian festivals of Ireland. But apart from these official names, Irish has an exceedingly rich range of 'unofficial' or folk names for the months of the year and we shall deal with some of these in the following notes.

**EANAIR:** **Mí Eanáir** 'January'. Borrowed from the Latin **Januarius** which in turn is based on Janus, the name of the ancient two-headed god who looks both ways and was thus regarded as the guardian of the door and of the beginning of the year. Among the older generations this month would often be referred to as 'the first month of the year' and **Mí na bliana úire** 'the month of the new year'. Dinneen also records the forms **Geanar** and **Gionbhar**.

**FEABHRA:** **Mí Feabhra** 'February'. This again is a borrowing, from the Latin **Februarius** which meant 'the month of purification'. In some districts February was also known as **Mí faoide**, which is found in the

strange phrase **Coicís faoide agus coicís fáide** and which refers to the first and second fortnights of February respectively. Another local name for this month is **Mí na bhfaoillí** in which **foillí** was originally the term for February 1st (**Lá Fhéil(e) Brighde** 'St Brigit's Day') but which was later used for the entire month. It is found in the old country proverb **Faoillí a mharaíonn na caoirigh** 'It is February that kills the sheep'.

**MARTA:** **An Mhárta**, **Mí na Márta** 'March'. Basically from the same source as **Dé Máirt** 'Tuesday', namely the Latin name of the Roman god of war Mars, although from the phrase **mensis Martius** 'the month of Mars'. Because of its traditional reputation for cold and unpleasant weather the older generations would often refer to it as **Mí na ngág** 'the month of chaps or chilblains' and of course the phrase **gaoth Mhárta** 'a March gale' is common enough, and dreaded, among farmers and fishermen alike. It was also known as **Mí Earraigh** 'the month of Spring', and also as **Mí na Bó Riahaí** 'the month of the brindled cow'. The story goes that at the beginning of April the brindled cow complained about the bitterness of March, so March borrowed a few days from April, but these were so wet and stormy that the poor cow was drowned. As a result March has one day more than April and the borrowed days are traditionally known as **laetha na (bó) riabhaí** 'the days of the brindled cow'.

**AIBREAN:** **Mí Aibreáin** 'April'. The form **Aibreol** has also been recorded, which is obviously a little

closer to the Latin **Aprilis** 'April', from which it has come. In Omeath, in County Louth, it would also be referred to as **Mí Fó Chaisc** 'the month about Easter'. Its reputation for being wet has earned it the frequently used description **Aibrán bog braonach** 'mild showery April'.

**BEALTAINÉ:** **Mí na Bealtaine** 'May'. This is the first of the native Irish names in the calendar. **Bealtine**, along with **Samhain**, which we shall meet later, is one of the great pre-Christian festivals and marked the end of the winter half of the Celtic or early Irish year. It is associated with the lighting of great bonfires. Middle Irish **Bel-tene** is interpreted as meaning 'bright fire' - between which cattle were driven either for purification or to ward off evil spirits. It is said that this driving between two fires gave rise to the idiom **idir dhá thine lae Bealtaine** 'between the two fires of Bealtaine', that is 'between two stools', 'in a dilemma'. **Lá Bealtaine** is the first day of May or May-Day which of course used to be celebrated with a **crann Bealtaine** 'May-pole'. The older generations would also refer to **Sean-Bhealtaine** 'Old May' (according to the Julian calendar) which is now 11th May.



Oengus and the sorrowing Gráinne with the body of Diarmaid at Brú na Bóinne (Newgrange)

	Eanáir				
Luain	1	8	15	22	29
Máirt	2	9	16	23	30
Céadaoin	3	10	17	24	31
Deardaoin	4	11	18	25	
Aoine	5	12	19	26	
Satharn	6	13	20	27	
Domhnach	7	14	21	28	

	Feabhra				
	5	12	19	26	
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22		
2	9	16	23		
3	10	17	24		
4	11	18	25		

	Márta				
	5	12	19	26	
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22	29	
2	9	16	23	30	
3	10	17	24	31	
4	11	18	25		

	Aibreán				
30	2	9	16	23	
	3	10	17	24	
	4	11	18	25	
	5	12	19	26	
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22	29	

	Bealtaine				
Luain		7	14	21	28
Máirt	1	8	15	22	29
Céadaoin	2	9	16	23	30
Deardaoin	3	10	17	24	31
Aoine	4	11	18	25	
Satharn	5	12	19	26	
Domhnach	6	13	20	27	

	Meitheamh				
	4	11	18	25	
	5	12	19	26	
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22	29	
2	9	16	23	30	
3	10	17	24		

	Iúl				
30	2	9	16	23	
31	3	10	17	24	
	4	11	18	25	
	5	12	19	26	
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22	29	

	Lúnasa				
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22	29	
2	9	16	23	30	
3	10	17	24	31	
4	11	18	25		
5	12	19	26		

	Méán Fómhair				
Luain		3	10	17	24
Máirt		4	11	18	25
Céadaoin		5	12	19	26
Deardaoin		6	13	20	27
Aoine		7	14	21	28
Satharn	1	8	15	22	29
Domhnach	2	9	16	23	30

	Deireadh Fómhair				
1	8	15	22	29	
2	9	16	23	30	
3	10	17	24	31	
4	11	18	25		
5	12	19	26		
6	13	20	27		
7	14	21	28		

	Samhain				
	14	12	19	26	
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22	29	
2	9	16	23	30	
3	10	17	24		
4	11	18	25		

	Nollaig				
31	3	10	17	24	
	4	11	18	25	
	5	12	19	26	
	6	13	20	27	
	7	14	21	28	
1	8	15	22	29	
2	9	16	23	30	

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**MEITHEAMH:** *Mí Meithimh, Mí an Mheithimh* 'June'. Another native Irish month-name. Other names for this month among the older generations of native speakers were *Mí Samhraidh* 'the month of summer', *Mí Mheán* 'the middle month', *Mí Mheán an tSamhraidh* 'the middle month of summer', *Mí (na) Féile Eoin* 'the month of St. John's Feast'. Although *Meitheamh* is nowadays normally used for the month of June specifically, and for midsummer itself, in earlier days it could also be used more generally for the middle month of any of the four seasons as in *Meitheamh (an) Earraigh* 'March', *Meitheamh Samhraidh (an tSamhraidh)* 'June', *Meitheamh Fómhair (an Fhómhair)* 'September' *Meitheamh Geimhridh (an Gheimhridh)* 'December'.

**IUL:** *Mí Iúil* 'July'. Another borrowing from the Latin, this time from the personal name Julius. This month has quite a range of native Irish names, however. Among them we find *Mí Bhuí* 'the yellow month', *Mí na súl buí* 'the month of the daisies', and *Mí meagán* 'the month of the green-fly', and *Iúl an Gh-abáiste* 'July of the cabbage'. The name *Mí croite na mealbhóg* 'the month of shaking out the wallets' (which held the corn) refers to that period of hunger that traditionally occurred in earlier times between the end of the stored crops and the new harvest, although this is much more explicit in *Iúl an Ocras* 'July of the Hunger'. But what is the origin of the name *Mí an Albanaigh* 'the month

of the Scotsman'? Finally it is also known fairly prosaically as *Deireadh an tSamhraidh* 'the end of Summer'.

**LUNASA:** *Mí (na) Lúnasa* 'August'. Named after the Celtic god *Lugos* whose name is also found in the place-names Lyons, Laon and Leyden, each of which derives from Gaulish *Lugo-dunon* 'the fort of Lugos'. In some districts it was known as *Mí na Lúnasna*, *Mí faoi Lúnasa*, and *Mí na Lúna*. Other names that have been recorded are, in literature *Mí Bhuí Troghain* 'the month of parturition or birth' and in speech *an chéad mhí d'Fhómhar* 'the first month of Autumn'. *Lá Lúnasa* '1st August' is of course the famous *Lammas* (=Loaf-mass) Day.

**MEANFOMHAIR:** *Mí Mhean an Fhómhair* 'September'. It is also known as *Meán Fómhair*, *Meitheamh an Fhómhair* 'the middle of Autumn', as *an tarna mhí d'Fhómhar* 'the second month of Autumn', and as *Mí (na) Féil(e) Michíl* 'the month of St Michael's Feast'.

**DEIREADH F'OMHAIR:** *Mí Deireadh Fómhair* 'October'. Again this has a number of forms such as *Mí Dheireadh an Fhómhair*, *an mhí déanach (deireannach) d'Fhómhar* 'the last month of Autumn', or even *Mí an Fhómhair*, 'the month of Autumn'.

**SAMHAIN:** *Mí (na) Samhna* 'November'. This month is named after the great feast that is believed to have marked the beginning of the

ancient Celtic year. In the Old Irish tale of the birth of *Cú Chulainn* it is stated that the Ulstermen celebrated *Samhain* by feasting for three days before and three days after *Lá Samhna* which corresponds to what is known as *Féile na Marbh* 'All Hallows' or *Féile na Naomh Uile* 'All Saints'. *Oíche Shamhna* is of course our Hallowe'en.

**MI (NA) NOLLAG** 'December'. Here we are back again to the Latin names since *Nollaig* (earlier *Nodlaig*) 'Christmas' comes from *Natalica*. Native Irish names for the month are *Meán Geimhridh* or *Meitheamhan Gheimhridh* 'the middle of winter'. Christmas Day is usually known as *Lá Nollag* or *Lá Nollag Mór* 'Great Christmas Day' (or *Lá Chinn Bliana* 'the day of the end of the year' in *Cois Fharraige*) by the older generations, some of whom would refer to New Year's Day as *Lá Nollag Beag* 'Little Christmas Day' - although this should in fact be Epiphany (6 January) or Twelfth Night and to the period between them as *na laetha idir an dá Nollaig* 'the days between the two Christmases' and to Epiphany or Twelfth Night itself as *Lá Chinn an dá dhéag* 'the day at the end of the twelve days'. Just before Christmas the greeting would usually be *go gcaithe tú an Nollaig!* 'May you spend Christmas!' or *go dtuga Dia Nollaig mhaith dhuit!* 'May God give you a good Christmas!' and the reply *go mba hé dhuit!* 'And to you too!'