

Shrove Tuesday

It is a matter of common record that in the year 1648 the ancient holiday of Shrove Tuesday fell in the month of February. Despite the official condition of Terror existing throughout some parts of Britain, and the increasingly strict conditions of religious governance pertaining throughout all parts of Britain, recognised and registered denominations were permitted to take full part in the celebrations associated with the holiday.

In many parts of England bells were by special permission rung in churches: the last time, in fact, that church bells were to be heard in England, at least legally, during the second Protectorate. And two ships carrying lemons had docked at English ports in the preceding week: one landed her cargo at Bristol, and the other into London River. These lemons were distributed throughout the country, so that the traditional pancake-races might properly be celebrated with the presence of the equally traditional lemon. And - as had been rumoured the previous autumn - so they were.

In Scotland, however, where the ideas of confession, absolution and Lent had in recent centuries somewhat fallen into desuetude, the holiday was not widely celebrated. The restored Protectorate made up for this, however, by publishing the terms of its forthcoming Toleration and Conformity (Scotland) Bill. These terms proposed the replacement of the Westminster Confession as the foundation-stone of national religious observance by the Thirty Nine Articles, the application in Scotland of the English Prayer Book, and the replacement of the existing form of church governance and authority by a consistory court of Star Chamber. A distinguished prelate from the High wing of the Church of England was,

meanwhile, appointed as Archbishop for Scotland's presbyterian churches, while attendance at Sunday service was with immediate effect to be obligatory for all civilians in possession of a food ration-card.

A thoughtful editorial in the Church Times generally welcomed the new arrangements, and observed that the time was clearly ripe for a consolidation of work begun in the 17th century. It added that consent by acclamation to the appointment of the new Archbishop was widely expected when he was welcomed in person, in a matter of weeks, at the coming (and final) general assemblies of the presbyterian churches in Scotland.

On the same day, the Daily Mail published a series of letters and documents which showed conclusively that the leaders of the recent insurrection had been in the pay of an unidentified, but clearly foreign, power: while the trial of the Pollitt Plotters opened and closed at the Old Bailey within a matter of minutes. Although 137 of the plotters' closest colleagues were on hand to give evidence for the prosecution, Pollitt insolently withdrew confessions of spying and treason originating with the Cohen-Petrovsky gang in the early 1930s, and extending in later years to paid espionage for Franco, Hitler, the King of Siam and the Japanese Mikado.

Despite a plea from his distinguished counsel, the liberal jurist D.N. Pritt, Pollitt cravenly insisted on his innocence of the charges, and the judicial authorities quickly came to the view that further investigations were clearly required. After thirty-six hours of very intensive questioning (and a private meeting with the principal prosecution witness Rose Cohen) Pollitt withdrew his preposterous claim of innocence, and the court prepared to re-convene in camera.

That same evening the international wire services carried unconfirmed reports that all four members of the British royal family - who had long been supposed dead, with the king thought to have been recently executed in Whitehall - were actually alive and well in the United States, and had been given emergency asylum by the American authorities in Washington. No further information was available, but it was expected that the city's immigration authorities would make a statement within one, or at most, two days.

That evening too, unconfirmed reports from New York's precious-stone district were suggesting that the insignia of the George and Garter, which had recently surfaced on the worldwide market for stolen jewels, had disappeared, and that a number of high-quality replicas were already circulating among international dealers.

In Scotland, the endless snowfalls of the previous month gave way to a gigantic thaw which in its turn occasioned floods and flooding on a wide scale. These floods hampered the continuing political stabilisation which had followed the turbulent events of the January Rising - as these events had already become known. In particular, they hampered the work of the expeditionary force which had been sent to the north of the country to destroy an impromptu army of children, said to be under the command of a 16-year old girl, and which in a matter of weeks had taken effective command of the entire north of Scotland.

Meantime, in Edinburgh, the North British hotel had been acquired by one of the city's leading entertainment entrepreneurs. The acquisition had been delayed by a civil action in the courts relating to defamation of business reputation and personal character. Specifically, the Scotsman newspaper had published a

vicious calumny to the effect that the entrepreneur in question had been involved in dealing in huge quantities of the drug cocaine: and had further stolen, from unidentified owners, at least one ton of the drug for purposes best know to himself. The Scotsman was ordered to publish a grovelling front-page apology to the entrepreneur - which it was happy to do - and to futher pay undisclosed but punitive damages to him.

On the steps of the High Court afterwards, the jubilant entrepreneur reminded waiting court-reporters that his business moto had always been 'Ômy word is my bond': and that the damages in question, which were very substantial, would go at once to an undisclosed charity of his private choice.

The entrepreneur also told the reporters that he hoped to improve his new hotel's catering potential and offer a standard of late-night hospitality of which the city could be truly proud. He further pledged his not inconsiderable resources to the hunt for two respected members of the city's drugs police, who had been missing for ten days somewhere in the north, and who were - he said - personal and sporting friends of long standing.

He added that, personally, he didn't believe that tons of cocaine had ever been smuggled into the country, and the fact that nothing had ever been found by the Edinburgh police but sealed American-army ammunition cases packed with perfectly legal cane sugar was obvious proof that the cocaine had never existed in the first place.

Still, he thought that every true and honest man should be ready to stand up and be counted in the court of public opinion, not to mention any other court that mattered; and he was pleased to announce that he had forgiven the legal authorities of Scotland the

trouble, inconvenience and expense that they had put him to. The entrepreneur was at once cheered by a small crowd of senior lawyers in silver wigs, along with general wellwishers, before rushing off to take up his new challenges at the foot of the North Bridge.

As for the comet which had streaked in the night sky during the last days of January and the early days of the following month. It soon disappeared, and the Protectorate's astronomers assured all who would listen that it was - astronomically speaking - an event of no significance whatsoever. A number of Daniel agitators was dealt with severely within the terms of the Terror and its emergency legislation pertaining to rumour-mongering, and that soon put an end to the matter. Or at least it did for a little time. By the end of February, however, it was clear that huge numbers of otherwise sensible people clearly believed that the Messiah had come, or come back, to England on Shrove Tuesday at an unspecified location. But that is another story, of course.

As for this story, and those who play a part in it. Andrei Vyshinsky won both the Lenin and Stalin peace prizes, and died, aged 71, in 1954. The Dean of Canterbury Hewlett Johnson was also judged a worthy winner of the Stalin prize in 1951, and contrived to live for another fifteen years after that honour. The leading progressive barrister D.N. Pritt got the Lenin prize three years later, and lived until as recently as 1972.

Lord Rothermere, meantime, having survived the cowardly attack by the collectivised peasants of Kent on his armoured getaway train to the Channel ports, soon resumed stewardship of his great newspaper empire. And Geoffrey Fisher survived a mysterious and unsolved murder-attempt on the steps of Canterbury cathedral, and went on to outlive the second Protectorate. He won

no international prizes of any sort: but was elevated to the restored House of Lords in 1961, and lived for another decade or so in lordly and pious decrepitude.

As for the royal family. The wife of George VI lived to a great age and died, revered by many as the Queen Mother, in 2002. Before burial her body lay for some days under the great south window of Westminster Hall at almost exactly the same spot where the Protectorate's George VI had been tried for his life on January 30, 1948. It was also the very spot at which Andrei Vyshinsky, Denis Nowell Pritt, Q.C. MP, the Protectorate's Lord Chancellor and the Dean of Canterbury Hewlett Johnson, celebrated later that day the theft of the George and Garter, and planned the disposal of the body.

The king's second daughter Princess Margaret Rose died in the same year as her mother, and she too was buried with appropriate honours. At time of writing, however, the king's older daughter reigns as the first and second Queen Elizabeth. Indeed, it was the archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, who crowned Princess Elizabeth queen in the rebuilt Westminster Abbey in 1953, not long after the fall of the second Protectorate.

As for the king himself. King George VI died in 1952 on the day that Winston Churchill escaped from Soviet captivity, and Soviet nuclear bombers came within seconds of obliterating Britain in its entirety.

But that too, of course, is entirely another story.