

THE OFFICIOUS BYSTANDER

MILLENNIUM MADNESS

Some 1475 years ago, a Scythian monk set out to solve a mathematical puzzle which had defeated the best minds of his era - to formulate a simple algorithm to ascertain the date of Easter in any year. The rather uncharitable name by which he was known amongst his monastic brethren, Dionysius Exiguus ("Dennis the Little"), may well have been forgotten by history, but for a relatively simple shortcut which he took in devising this algorithm. In those times, years were counted according to the reigns of local rulers; Diminutive Dennis saw that his task would be made very much easier if years were counted consecutively from a common starting-point. As his starting-point, he chose the year now known as 1AD.

The way in which he arrived at this starting-point is the subject of some doubt. One view is that he attempted to ascertain the date of Christ's birth, regarding that event (from the viewpoint of a Christian cleric) as the most logical starting-point for what was proposed to be a universal system of counting years. It is more likely, though, that he simply chose a year which happened to fit comfortably with his proposed algorithm, and which also happened to coincide with the (approximate) beginning of the Christian era. Most likely, it was the English cleric and historical scholar, the Venerable Bede, who started using the abbreviation AD (*Anno Domini*, or "Year of our Lord") when applying the system devised by Dennis, thereby popularising the assumption that the year 1AD was the year in which the historical personage of Jesus Christ was born.

Either way - whether the mistake was made by Dennis, or by Bede - it clearly was a mistake. Whilst the precise year and date of Christ's nativity cannot be accurately ascertained, from either Biblical or other historical references, this much is clear: that Christ was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who died in about the year now known as 4BC. Incidentally, it is also considered to be unlikely that Christ was born on 25 December, in the dead of Winter; modern historians (both secular and theological) accept that the Child of Nazareth was probably born in the Spring or Summer, between the years 6BC and 4BC.

So the news, for anyone intent on celebrating Christ's 2000th birthday, is this: **you're too late !**

Of course, if Christ had been born in the year 1AD, His 2000th birthday would not occur until the year 2001AD. And even accepting that the year 1AD had no particular historical or religious significance, other than as the year arbitrarily chosen more than five centuries later as the starting-point for an obscure Scythian monk's calculations, its 2000th anniversary will occur on 1 January 2001.

Nonetheless, it is pointless arguing that most "millennium" celebrations will take place twelve months too soon. Despite the backing of both the Greenwich Observatory in England, and the US Naval Observatory, anyone who dares to suggest that the forthcoming celebrations should be postponed until the end of the 2000th year - specifically, the evening of 31 December 2000 to 1 January 2001 - is suspected of pathological obduracy. It would be a strange family indeed that celebrates Grandpa's "century" on the first day of his 100th year; it would be an equally strange cricket team that applauds a batsman's "century" as he sets out on his 100th run; and it would be an exceedingly strange student who celebrates a decade of education on the first day of "Year 10". But, with so many people committed to having a big party - and so many businesses jostling to profit from the occasion - even the most cogent arguments will not dissuade people from celebrating the 1999th anniversary of an historical non-event. And if people are hard of hearing when told that they are celebrating the wrong year, they are stone deaf if anyone points out that they are also celebrating the wrong date. Yet it is only since the mid-18th Century that Western civilisation has agreed on celebrating 1 January as the first day of the year. In Roman times, the year commenced on 1 March - this is why the 10th, 11th and 12th months of our calendar were named by the Romans as the 8th month (October), 9th month (November), and 10th month (December). For reasons which have been lost in the mists of history, the English traditionally celebrated New Year's Day on 25th March, known as "Lady Day", and supposed to be the anniversary of Christ's conception (falling precisely nine months before Christmas). Throughout English history, until the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, 24 March of one year was immediately followed by 25 March of the

following year. This “Year of Grace” (as it was known) still features in English revenue law, as the English fiscal year commences on 6 April. When England adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1752, 11 days were lost; in order to recover taxes for a full year of 365 days, the Exchequer counted from 25 March 1752 to 5 April 1753 - and has continued the practice ever since.

Though it may seem strange to celebrate the 2000th anniversary of a day on which nothing in particular happened - and to have that celebration on the wrong day in the wrong year - there is still one plausible argument in favour of a big celebration on New Year’s Day, 2000. Mankind has always attached a mystical significance to “special” numbers. After ten centuries of years beginning with the digit “1”, who can doubt that there is some mystical significance when the calendar changes over to years beginning with the digit “2” ? Only the most extreme pedant would object that Arabic numeration was not used by Europeans until well after the calendar changed from the year CMXCIX (999) to M (1000).

Even so, only a minority of the World’s population will be enriched by the experience of seeing this millennial change in their calendars. For Orthodox Jews, whose calendars date from the (supposed) time of Moses, next year will be the year 5760/61. In Islamic countries, whose calendars date from the time of the prophet Mohammad, it will be the year 1421. And in the world’s most populous country - China - it will be the “Year of the Dragon”, with the number 4698.

Even for those of us who number our years from the arbitrary starting-point chosen by Dennis the Little, the date on our calendars will only appear to be “special” because we use Arabic numerals, based on a system devised to allow our primitive forebears to count on their fingers. Despite all the hype surrounding the so-called “Millennium Bug”, the year 2000 will not be of any significance to computers, which use a binary system of counting. So far as your computer is concerned, we are merely moving from the year 1111100111 to the year 1111101000. It is only when it attempts to translate binary notation into decimal notation, so that the numbers can be understood by a species who learnt to count on their fingers, that your computer may run into trouble.

History records that each previous *fin-de-siècle* has been greeted with a measure of consternation and anxiety, not the least of which occurred at the end of the Tenth Century. According to various accounts - which may or may not have been exaggerated by later historians - an apocalyptic "panic terror" swept Christendom. The "Second Coming" was anticipated with less than universal equanimity, and the "end of the world" was considered to be nigh.

We like to feel that we are a little less superstitious - and a little more civilised - than our ancestors were 1000 years ago. At the beginning of the present Century, peaceful and even optimistic celebrations were held, at least in Western countries; and it is of some interest to note that the world was not gripped by the fundamental arithmetical error of celebrating the wrong year, since the major celebrations occurred on 1 January 1901. This had a particular significance in Australia, since the first day of the new Century was also the first day of a new federated nation.

It is sad to think that the ignorance which engendered "millennium madness" 1000 years ago is still alive today, despite the fact that citizens of even the World's most underprivileged countries are far better educated now than citizens of even the World's most advanced countries were then. What makes this even sadder is that today's "millennium madness" is not the result of sincere and devout (albeit misguided) religious zeal, but of the commercial zealotry of people determined to make some fast money. And the money is certainly there to be made, with employees in service industries charging 5 or 10 times their usual hourly rates, \$500.00 per head dinners in restaurants, and quite astronomical charges for flights to and accommodation at places which purport to offer an early glimpse of the "new millennium's" first dawn.

Only an unrepentant kill-joy would attempt to deny people the pleasure of a major celebration, even if the major celebration falls only 1998 years and 10 months after the date (1 March, in the year 1AD) which Dennis the Little chose as the starting-point for his long-forgotten algorithm. But there is some advantage in being a kill-joy, as there are not likely to be exorbitant charges for travel, accommodation and meals when the true millennial anniversary occurs on 1 March 2001. Meanwhile, the last laugh surely

belongs to Dionysius Exiguus, which may be some compensation for his humiliating moniker.