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“This stinckyng Idoll”: the origins of some English Mayday traditions

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Introduction

When the Labour Government came to power in 1974, Michael Foot, the Secretary of State for Employment, suggested that he wanted 1st May as a holiday. This was to correspond with the International Labour Day. It was argued, however, that having a Bank Holiday in midweek would cause disruption to business, so it was agreed that the Bank Holiday would be the first Monday in May. It was finally created in 1978.¹

The May Bank Holiday has a much longer tradition. This paper will examine some of the rituals associated with the Mayday festivities and some of their possible Pagan heritage. This paper is part of a much longer work in progress, so the scope will be limited to a study of the Irish tradition of *Bealtaine* – the equivalent of the 1st May as the start of summer, with maypoles and May flowers, with a brief discussion of milkmaids, chimney sweeps and how the practices have been incorporated by Christianity.

Importance of May

Traditionally, May was a time of pasturing and sowing, after the majority of the spring frosts had passed and the livestock were sent out to pasture. Bede records that the month of May was called *primilci-monap*, where the cattle were

¹ J.W. Mackley, Principal in the Department of Employment (1973–1978) [Pers comm.].

milked three times a day 'such ... was the fertility of Britain'.² May-time was, as Christina Hole describes it: it is a 'simple and spontaneous expression of joy at the beginning of the summer'.³ It is a civic, rather than an ecclesiastical celebration, a time of dancing and of collecting flowers. One must remember that with the introduction of the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, the annual cycle was brought forward by 11 days; thus May Day would have been later and the growing cycle would have advanced somewhat.

Beneath the celebrations of spring were what were considered to be barely-disguised Pagan rituals; Puritans abolished the Mayday festivities (only for them to be reinstated with the restoration of Charles II in 1660). However, even in the early thirteenth century, Bishop Grosseteste forbade the decoration of the maypole in his diocese of Lincoln, describing the maypole as a 'definite survival of Pagan Spring festivals' and banned the practice of maypole veneration.⁴

Beltane

Mayday was the equivalent of the Celtic festival of *Bealtaine*, one of the four great quarter days and it has come to incorporate some of the Celtic traditions.⁵ The week surrounding Mayday marked the beginning of summer, which lasted until July.⁶ Beltane is first mentioned in a glossary attributed to Cormac, Prince and Archbishop of Cashel in South Tipperary, written around 908CE. The glossary describes how 'The Druids kindled two immense fires, with great incantation and

² Bede, *The Reckoning of Time*, trans. Faith Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 54.

³ Christina Hole, *English Custom and Usage*, 3rd ed. (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1950), p. 67.

⁴ C.G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama: The English Scene from Conquest to Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1949), p. 608.

⁵ J.A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (New York, Dover Publications Inc., 2003), p. 264. The other three days are Samhain (1st November, and New Year's Day in the Pre-Christian Calendar), Imbolc (1 February) and Lughnasa (1st August).

⁶ Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 27–28.

towards them drove the cattle which they forced to pass between them every year'.⁷ These sacred fires were seen to protect both men and cattle. The fires were close together, so if the cattle passed through without injury, then it was seen to be an omen of good fortune, hence an ancient maxim about being placed 'between the two fires of Bel'.⁸ (This passing through the fire could also represent a symbolic rebirth). In addition, the people extinguished their own house fires, which were rekindled with the druid's sacred flame.⁹ The name *Bealtaine* is suggested to have been derived from the Celtic Sun god *Bel* and *teine*, the Celtic for 'fire',¹⁰ although this application of *tanit* is disputed by some, including Whitley Stokes, and it is argued instead that the name referred to the sacred druidic mounts throughout the kingdom which formed a 'chain of connection with each other' when the fires were ignited, hence *Bel-ain* – fire ring.¹¹ These fires would have originally been linked to the Druidic rituals and would have been made of the sacrificial bones which gives us the word that we still use today: *bone-fire*.

Bealtaine fires are still ignited in Devon and Cornwall and may be echoes of the human sacrifices that Julius Caesar describes.¹² The sacrifices were replaced with the symbolic performances of the martyr king and queen of the wood, whose death and rebirth represent the passing of the seasons as well as personifications of vegetation and fertility and the slaying of the May King

⁷ Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, vol. xiv (Dublin: R Graisberry, 1825), p. 123.

⁸ *Idem*.

⁹ Trans. R.I.A. xiv, p. 122.

¹⁰ Hew B Colquhoun, *Our Descent from Israel Proved by Cumulative Evidence* (Glasgow: John Brown & Gray, 1940), p. 78.

¹¹ Trans. R.I.A. xiv, p. 122.

¹² Christopher R. Fee with David A Leeming, *Gods, Heroes and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 65.

effected the transfer of his life force to his successor; thus the symbolic burning of the tree or pole would have demonstrated the transference of the power.¹³

The death of the May King is represented in the Morris Sword Dance where the fool stands inside the interwoven swords and falls to the ground as the swords are slid away. These characters may well be the source for other characters from English folklore including Robin Hood and the King of the May. Originally, Robin Hood appeared in a separate play to the King of the May, but both contain similar mythological strands.¹⁴ Joyce describes how a fire could be lit beneath a sacred tree.¹⁵ This later became represented as the maypole decorated with greenery which MacCulloch argues is the representation of the vegetation spirit.¹⁶

The Maypole

So, the maypole was believed to be a decorated tree, originally one that would have been venerated in the forest; later it was the tallest tree in the forest which was erected in the village square, stripped of all branches save those at the top. In time, it became a tall shaft that was decorated with flowers and ribbons which represented the living tree along with the principles of fertility. Thomas Hobbes suggested that the maypole was an echo of the worship of Priapus, the Roman god of male potency. Consequently, the maypole, a phallus, was seen to be symbolically thrust into the womb of mother earth.¹⁷ That's one interpretation of it, but it could just as plausibly refer to the *axis mundi* `a central point in the

¹³ John Matthews, *The Quest for the Green Man* (London: Godsfield Press, 2001), p. 44; MacCulloch, *Religion of the Ancient Celts*, pp. 265, 267.

¹⁴ Lady Raglan, (Julia Somerset), 'The "Green Man" in Church Architecture', *Folklore*, 50 (1939): 45-57, p. 50; M. Marcangelo, 'Robin Hood', *Folklore*, 67(1956): 179-82, p. 180.

¹⁵ P.W. Joyce, *History of Irish Names of Places*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1901), I, p. 216.

¹⁶ J.A. MacCulloch, *Religion of the Ancient Celts*, p. 163.

¹⁷ Patricia Montley, *In Nature's Honour: Myths and Rituals Celebrating the Earth* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005), p. 139.

universe that linked together different levels of creation'.¹⁸ In Norse mythology, this festival also commemorates the death of Oðin who attains the knowledge of the runes by being hanged on Yggdrasil, the World Tree and is then resurrected nine days later, consequently employing both the maypole imagery as well as the birth-death-resurrection trope that is seen in other figures associated with spring and rebirth, for example, King Arthur and St George.¹⁹

John Stow's *Survey of London* (published in 1603) describes the maypole at St Andrew's Undershaft Church in Leadenhall Street.

At the North west corner of this warde in the said high streete, standeth the faire and beautifull parish Church of S. Andrew the Apostle, with an addition to be knowne from other Churches of that name, of the *knape* or Vndershaft, and so calls S. *Andrew Vndershaft*, because of that old time, euerie yeare on May day in the morning it was vsed, that an high or long shaft, or May-pole, was set up there, in the midst of the streete, before the south doore of the sayd Church, which shaft when it was set on ende, and fixed in the ground, was higher then the Church steeple.²⁰

Set up annually on the morning of May day, symbolically, the maypole was higher than the church steeple and decorated with a bunch of flowers or *knape*. Likewise, *Chaunce of the Dice*, attributed to Chaucer (but more likely dated at c.1450), refers to 'the grete shafte of Corneylle' – which was a permanent maypole which stood by the church of St Andrew in Cornhill.²¹

While the maypole may be associated with Pagan or Heathen symbolism, Simpson and Roud argue that 'the limited distribution of poles in Wales and Scotland, and the paucity of references there, argue strongly against the

¹⁸ Julia A Hendon and Rosemary A Joyce (eds.) *Mesoamerican Archaeology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 323.

¹⁹ Simon Brighton and Terry Welbourn, *Echoes of the Goddess* (Hersham: Ian Allan, 2010), p. 195.

²⁰ John Stow, *A Survey of London: Reprinted from the text of 1603, with introduction and notes by Charles Lethbridge Kingsford*, (Adamant Media Corporation, 2001), I, p. 143.

²¹ Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 233

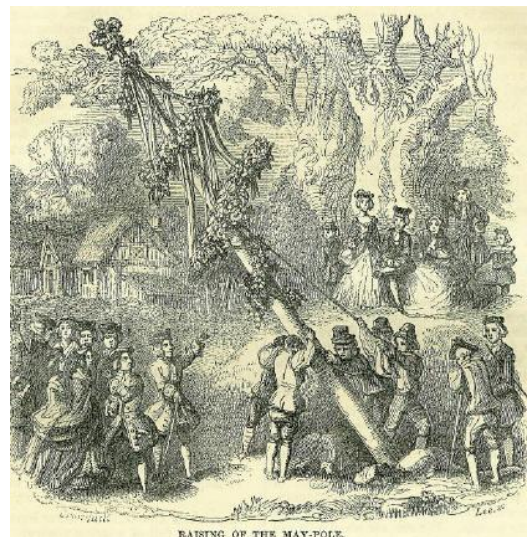
existence of maypoles before the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England.²² However, once the tradition of the maypole had been established in the communities, it then fell to the people to decorate them.

Decorating the Maypole

The tradition of collecting flowers is described by John Lydgate in his poem, 'Mumming at Bishopwood' (c. 1450).

Mighty Flourra, goddes of fresshe floures,
 Whiche clothed hast the soyle in lousty grene,
 Made buddes springe with hir swote showres
 By influence of the sonne so sheene;
 To do plesaunce of entent ful clene
 Unto th'estates wheoche that nowe sitte here,
 Hathe Veere doune sent hir owen doughter dere,

Here he describes the arrival of 'Mighty Flourra, goddes of fresshe floures', daughter of Spring (Veere).²³ Likewise, in *The Knight's Tale* Emily does 'honour to May' and 'gadereth floures, party white and rede, To make a subtil gerland for hire hede' (ll. 1047, 1053–54).²⁴ In 1777, English antiquarian John Brand describes how in the 'old calendar of the Romish Church', 30th April is a time when 'The Boys go out and seek May-Trees' (*Maii Arbores a Pueris exquiruntur*).²⁵ Brand may have been demonstrating his aversion to 'Maying' believing it to be a Catholic practice.



²² Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 229.

²³ *Mumming at Bishopswood*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 59. John Lydgate, 'Mumming at Bishopswood' in *Mummings and Entertainments*, ed. Claire Sponsler (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010); cf. Walter Franz Schirmer, *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the XVth Century*, trans. Ann E. Keep (London: Methuen, 1961), p. 103.

²⁴ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 208–9.

²⁵ John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: T. Saint, 1777), p. 257.

In *The Anatomy of Abuses*, written by pamphleteer Phillip Stubbes in 1585, the maypole is depicted as 'this stinckynge Idoll' which the villagers decorate with 'handkerchieves and flagges ... green boughs ... bowers and arbours'. He describes how the parishioners would go into the countryside spending 'all the night in passtimes'.²⁶ There was a concern that this was taking fertility rituals one stage too far, although, in fact, the dew of May morning (especially that from under oak trees or from hawthorn bushes) was believed to remove blemishes and freckles.²⁷ The villagers would then return with birch boughs and branches to decorate their houses, although this would have also been used to decorate the maypole.²⁸

Howitt describes how the maypole was hung with wreaths and garlands 'and afterwards remained the whole year untouched, except by the seasons, - a fading emblem and consecrated offering to the Goddess of flowers',²⁹ although in Horncastle (Lincolnshire), boys struck the maypole with wands of peeled willow wands decorated with cowslips called 'May-gads';³⁰ Hazlett argues that these wands are 'derived from the thyrsus wands once carried in ancient Roman Bacchanal rites' symbolising hedonism and fertility.³¹

After decorating the maypole, Stubbes observes, the revellers 'fall ... to banquet and feast, to leape and daunce about it, as the Heathen people did at the

²⁶ Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomy of Abuses in Shakespeare's Youth AD 1583*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall (London: N. Trubner and co. 1877-9), pp. 148-9.

²⁷ Reneé Critcher Lyons, *The Revival of Banned Dances: A Worldwide Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFaland and Co, 2012), p. 136.

²⁸ William Howitt, *Rural Life of England*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1840), p. 426.

²⁹ Howitt, *Rural Life of England*, p. 426.

³⁰ Howitt, *Rural Life of England*, p. 430.

³¹ W C Hazlett, *A Dictionary of Faiths and Folklore*, (Senate Books, 1995), pp. 402-6; cf. Ferdinand Joseph M. de Waele, *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Italian Antiquity* (Wetteren: Drukkerij Erasmus, 1927)

dedication of their Idolles'.³² Likewise, John Brand disapproves of the 'juvenile part of both sexes' and how they 'walk to some neighbouring Wood, accompanied with Musick and the blowing of Horns'. Brand explains that the Maying is 'the Relick of an ancient Custom among the Heathen, who observed the four last Days of April, and the first of May in Honour of the Goddess Flora ... observed with all Manner of Obsennity and Lewness, and the undecent Sports and Postures of naked Women, who were called together with the Noise of Trumpets, and danced before the Spectators'.³³ Christina Hole argues that this is a survival of the Roman tradition of *Floralia* a Roman fertility festival which was observed with games, dancing and feasts – Robert Bloomfield's 1822 poem 'Mayday with the Muses' still maintains all the classical symbolism – and in Helston in Cornwall, it is still celebrated as the Furry Dance.³⁴

That said, the Helston Furry (along with some other May day traditions), have become more acceptable with some Christian modification: the date of the Furry celebration has moved to 8th May – the Feast of St Michael – and includes the Hal-an-Tow (*halan* or *calends*, meaning the first of the month and *tow* meaning 'garland') which is a mystery play which includes St Michael, Robin Hood and Friar Tuck amongst its characters.³⁵ The pageantry has been celebrated by English monarchs such as Henry VII, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. John Stow describes how in 1515 Henry VIII and his queen, Catherine of Aragon, rode from Greenwich to Shooter's Hill, where they were met by Robin Hood and his men who gave the king a demonstration of their archery skill, and after which the

³² Stubbes, *Anatomy of Abuses*, pp. 148–9.

³³ Brand, *Observations*, p. 256.

³⁴ Hole, pp. 6-7; Paul Broadhurst, *The Green Man and the Dragon* (Launceston: Mythos Books, 2006), p. 31; Lewis Spence, *Ritual and Myth in Dance, Game and Rhyme* (London: Watts and Co, 1947), p. 148.

³⁵ Robert Bloomfield, *Mayday with the Muses* (London: Baldwin, Chadock and Joy, 1822); Roy Palmer, *Everyman's Book of English Country Songs* (London: J.M. Dent, 1979), No. 135; Simon Brighton and Terry Welbourn, *Echoes of the Goddess* (Hersham: Ian Allan, 2010), p. 203.

Royal couple were invited to a banquet in the forest in the tradition of the outlaws inviting Richard I back.

Brand's objection to the May-day celebrations was not simply because he considered Maying as 'a Piece of Superstition', but because it was about mixed-gender dancing. This led to 'much Wickedness and Debauchery [being] committed that Night, to the Scandle of whole Families, and the Dishonour of Religion' consequently, he concluded that 'there is all the Reason in the World, for laying it aside.'³⁶

Mayday and the Workers: Milkmaids and Chimney Sweeps

Even though it can be argued that the origins of the mayday celebrations derive from pagan festivals, there is a ballad dating from 1630 which describes milkmaids celebrating May-day:

Upon the first of May,
With garlands fresh and gay,
With mirth and musick sweet,
For such a season meet,
They passe their time away:
They dance away sorrow,
And all the day thorow
Their legs doe never fayle.
They nimble their feet doe ply,
And bravely try the victory
In honour o' th' milking paille.



In this celebration, they bedeck their pails with spring flowers and ribbons and dance in front of the houses where they delivered their milk for 'a small gratuity'.³⁷ Occasionally, they were accompanied by a cow which was also adorned with flowers and gilded horns. Lewis Spence argued that this is an allusion to the celebration of the cult of the sacred cow.³⁸ As Ronald Hutton

³⁶ Brand, *Observations*, p. 257.

³⁷ Spence, *Ritual and Myth*, p. 147.

³⁸ Spence, *Ritual and Myth*, pp. 148–9.

argues, the dance could be lucrative as well as 'symbolic in that the fresh new grass of late springs and early summer formed the basis for the year's first large yields of milk'.³⁹ Thus the celebration is linked back to the fertility rituals.⁴⁰



Chimney Sweepers on May-day.

George Phillips observes that the Chimney sweeps 'usurped this erstwhile pagan holiday from the milkmaids', and the earliest association of sweeps and Mayday is 1740. Here, Sweeps with blackened or unwashed faces 'brightened their mourning garb with rainbow-hued streamers and

rosettes' and some who are 'fantastically dressed in girls' clothes, with a great profusion of brick-dust, by way of paint, [and] gilt paper, beat their brushes and scrapers in 'all sorts of unearthly noises'.⁴¹ House fires were less common during the late spring and summer months, but, realistically, the best time to have the chimneys swept was when they were not in use. However, the sweeps swept people out of the way of the main part of the procession: the garland – that is, the Jack-in-the-Green – the lord, and the Lady, but this is the subject of a much longer discussion in its own right.⁴²

³⁹ Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 242.

⁴⁰ Robert Thomas Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium: Or, Dates, Charters, and Customs of the Middle Ages* (London: Henry Kent Causton & Co, 1841).

⁴¹ John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, arranged by Sir Henry Ellis, 3. Vols. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), I, pp. 218, 231, cited in George L Phillips, 'May-Day is Sweep's Day', *Folklore*, Vol. 60 (1949): 217–27, p. 219.

⁴² Phillips, 'May-Day is Sweep's Day', pp. 218, 219; cf. Roud, *London Lore*, p. 318.

Mayday and Christianity

As with many pagan festivals, there was an attempt to align the ceremonies of the incoming Christian religion with those of Pagan inhabitants of Britain in the last years of the sixth century. The association with Mary was an attempt to place 'a Christian significance' to the Mayday festivities.⁴³ The Christian calendar linked Mayday with the festivals of St Philip and St James. However, later traditions for example those recorded by Lady Alice Gomme in 1894 described the May girls singing:



'Knots of May we've brought you,
Before your door it stands;
It is but a sprout, but it's well budded out,
By the work of the Lord's hands.'⁴⁴

Here the 'knot' or bunch of flowers that was originally described as being collected as part of the feast of *Floralia* is now distinctively Christian, and gives rise to the later popular song, where the 'knot gathering' has become 'nut gathering': "Here we go gathering nuts in May". Ronald Hutton cites the tradition of leaving a posy of flowers outside a house in the morning, which, in turn, is expected to be replaced with food, drink or money as requested in the May songs, which are 'deeply pious' in their tones. However, the leaving of one gift to be replaced by another also seems to be symbolic of the dying and rebirth motif that is associated with spring.⁴⁵

⁴³ E.O. James, 'The Influence of Christianity on Folklore', *Folklore*, vol. 58 (1947): 361-76, p. 375.

⁴⁴ Lady Alice Bertha Gomme, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland*, (London: David Nutt, 1894), vol. 1, pp. 424-33

⁴⁵ Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, p. 231

Conclusion

In modern society, the maypole dance is still seen on occasions, as part of village celebrations and in schools; but as boys and girls weave ribbons from the maypole, it is unlikely that they (or even their teachers) are aware that this is an echo of a celebration that has been practiced for millennia. Furthermore, as Ronald Hutton argues, many of the Mayday celebrations and traditions were actually a reinvention by the Victorians as an 'expression of village community'.

As it stands, this paper just scratches the surface of an amalgam of Mayday festivities from around the country which may not have been observed in the same place, but clearly, as the Puritans feared, the traditions associated with Mayday were clearly Pagan in origin. These rituals link to the birth-death-resurrection motif seen in folkloric traditions such as King Arthur and St George.

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