

# Bealtaine and Calan Mai in Myth and Tradition

ILLUSTRATION: ©PATRICK WYNNE, 1990 CELTIC CALENDAR



## A Cornerstone

*Illustration: In Welsh legend, Gwyn ap Nudd, Lord of Winter, and Gwythyr ap Greidawl, Lord of Summer, fight until doomsday for the favor of the land-goddess, Creiddylad. Their alternating victories bring about the change of seasons.*

**T**he short poem in Irish in the box below defines the four "true seasons" of the old Celtic year: the season from the Feast of Bridget, *Lá Fhéile Bríde*, on February 1 to May Day; that from May Day, *Bealtaine*, to the harvest festival of *Lúnasa*, held in early August; that from the harvest to *Samhain*, the end of summer, which falls on the first of November; and that from the end of summer to the Feast of Bridget.

In that order, the seasons may be equated with spring, summer, autumn (or harvest), and winter. And though the poem begins with *Lá 'le Bríde*, scholars have agreed that the ancient Celts began the year at the end of summer, at the feast of *Samhain*.

The division of the year into four quarters derived from two halves, winter and summer, is a pan-Celtic phenomenon. The festivals that mark the start of each quarter have been celebrated in all the Celtic countries, under various names. Most likely, they were observed by the Celts of continental Europe and the Near East in ancient times, and in many parts of the Celtic world they are still celebrated in some fashion.

In Cornwall, for example, the lighting of May Day bonfires has been kept up by the Federation of Old Cornwall Societies. This present-day observance of an ancient Celtic May Day ritual represents a remarkable continuity of tradition. What's more, it underscores the strength and resiliency of the Celtic perception of time and its unique expression in the four quarterly feasts.

This article will examine the origins of one of those feasts—*Bealtaine*—the feast of the first of May. We will explore its place in Celtic tradition by looking at literary references to the holiday and May Day customs in the Celtic nations. But first we must consider the role *Bealtaine* played in the larger framework of the Celtic year.

#### The division of time

The ancient Celts recognized that all time could be divided into two basic elements, for example, night and day, or winter and summer. Those units of time could be divided again: the barren season into winter and spring, the growing season into summer and autumn.

In *Celtic Heritage*, Alwyn and Brinley Rees argue that

by Liam Ó Caiside

winter was considered the dark half of the year, the time when nature is dormant and fertility has left this world, presumably for the Otherworld. Summer, then, was the light half of the year, when the positive power of nature returned to the land, bringing fruitfulness and prosperity.

Each of the four quarterly feasts played a part in this continuing cycle of winter and summer, of death and rebirth in nature. Through their observance, the cycle of the seasons was commemorated.

The four festivals, therefore, were the cornerstones of an agrarian calendar. Each ushered in

*Rathaí firinneacha na bliana:  
Rath ó Lá 'le Bríde go Bealtaine,  
Rath ó Bhealtaine go Lúnasa,  
Rath ó Lúnasa go Samhain,  
Rath ó Shamhain go Lá 'le Bríde.*

a new phase of the year, a new season of activity associated with the land, especially with cattle-raising and the cultivation of wheat—the staple economic activities of early Celtic society. Irish folklorist Kevin Danaher has identified 10 characteristics common to all four feasts:

- Each is the first day of a season;
- Each is believed to bring a change in weather and climate;
- Each brings important changes in the working calendars of farmers and fishermen;
- All are marked by ceremonies and invocations to ensure protection and blessing for people, animals, and crops;
- Each is a time for fairs and assemblies and the negotiation and fulfillment of contracts, including the payment of tribute in ancient times and, more recently, the payment of rents;
- Divination of the future was possible at each occasion;
- Bonfires were lit, except on *Lá Fhéile Bríde*, or *Imbolc*;
- Festive ceremonies were held;
- Young people took part in masques and processions;
- Supernatural forces and beings were active.

#### Defending cattle, protecting the community

These elements were all characteristic of the May Day festival that marked the beginning of summer. In all the Celtic lands, the first day of May was the start of a new pastoral season. Cattle were driven from their winter stabling to new

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pastures, and specific ceremonies were performed to protect them from sickness and harm. Other May Day rituals welcomed the rekindling of fertility in the earth, as well as in animals and among people.

Where, and when, did these rituals and beliefs originate? The roots of Bealtaine and the other quarterly feasts are buried deep in Celtic and European prehistory. In Ireland, literary references to Bealtaine, Samhain, and Lúnasa are found as early as the eighth century. Although there is little literary evidence to indicate that the four feasts were celebrated by the Celts of continental Europe and Asia Minor, it seems likely that they also observed the festivals in some form in ancient times.

For instance, the Coligny calendar, a five-year calendar engraved on a bronze tablet unearthed in 1897 and dated to first-century Gaul, mentions a festival known as *Trinox Samonia*, "the three nights of the end of summer." That festival, naturally, has been identified with Samhain.

The Coligny calendar provides further evidence that the ancient Celts thought of time as a sequence of alternating qualities, such as light and dark, or summer and winter. Alwyn and Brinley Rees discuss the structure of the calendar at length in *Celtic Heritage*. The calendar contains a series of alternating 30-day months and 29-day months. The 30-day months are marked with the rubric "MAT," for *matís*, Old Celtic for "good" (cognate with modern Irish *maith*). The 29-day months are marked with the letters ANM, which is believed to be an abbreviation of *anmáís*, or "ungood." Furthermore, the Gaulish calendar divides the year into two seasons, *Samos* and *Giamos*, summer and winter. (The modern Irish names for those seasons—*Samhradh* and *Geimhreadh*—are consistent with the Old Celtic forms.)

The festivals ushering in summer and winter were the most important feasts of the old Celtic year, followed by Lúnasa (*Lughnasadh* before modern Irish spelling was simplified), the harvest festival of the pan-Celtic god Lúgh (called *Lleu* in Welsh and *Lugus* in ancient times on the Continent), and Lá Fhéile Bríde, which is also known as *Imbolc* or *Oímealg*, the first day of spring and the feast of St. Bridget, and, in pagan times, the goddess Brigantia.

### The Fires of Belenos

Bealtaine and Samhain were undeniably linked. In Old Irish, *Cetsamain*, "first of summer," was an alternative name for Bealtaine. The modern Irish word Bealtaine is derived from the Old Celtic *Belo-tennia*, which means "the fires of Belos," a reference to the bonfires lit on the holiday.

Belos was a god whose worship in ancient times is attested by dedications in widespread areas of Celtic Europe, most frequently in what was once Cisalpine Gaul—northern Italy and Switzerland. He appears to have been a god of light and healing with a special affinity for cattle and an association with the sun. Some of the dedications inscribed during Roman times refer to him as Apollo Belenus, a title that underscores his solar nature. According to tradition, he is buried in a tomb near Mont-Saint-Michel, *Tombelaine*.

There are indications that Belos was the Celtic version of an early Indo-European deity. A Slavic god with a possibly cognate name, Veles or Volos, was also a protector of cattle. Beyond that, it is difficult to discern much about his nature, or that of the myths concerning him. However, there are indications that he may have been a god who died and was reborn annually with the advent of winter and return of summer. Furthermore, many plants and herbs that blossom in

early summer have been identified or connected with Belos, especially plants with yellow blossoms such as St. John's Wort and Henbane. He was also associated with springs, and had a female counterpart, Belisama.

As the name Belotennia or Bealtaine implies, bonfires played a prominent role in the ritual observance of this festival. According to the *Lebor Gabala*, (the Irish "Book of Invasions") the first Bealtaine fire in Ireland was lit by Mide, the chief druid of the people of Nemed, at the hill of Uisneach. The fire kindled by Mide is supposed to have blazed for seven years, "so that he shed the fierceness of the fire for a time over the four quarters of Ireland."

Uisneach is traditionally known as the "navel" of Ireland, the spiritual equivalent of Teamhair, or Tara, which was long considered to be the political center of the island. Assemblies were held at Uisneach on Bealtaine, and at Tara on Samhain.

The Bealtaine fires were fires of purification. In Ireland, the cattle were driven between the fires. The Glossary of Cormac states that Bealtaine derived its name from the fires that the "druids of Ireland used to make on that day with great incantations," and mentions the ceremonial blessing and purification of the cattle.

The practice of lighting Bealtaine bonfires is remembered in the Irish saying *Idir dhá tine Lae Bhealtaine*, which translates as "between two fires of May Day," meaning roughly "between a rock and a hard place."

Bealtaine or Cetsamain is mentioned often in early Irish literature. For example, it is the subject of a ninth-century Irish poem praising the return of summer. Here are a few of its verses.<sup>2</sup>

*Cetamain, cain cucht,  
Ree roshair rann,  
canait luin liad lain  
dia lai grian gai ngann.*

"May Day, fair aspect, perfect season; blackbirds sing full song while the sun casts watery rays."

*Gairid cui cruaid den,  
Is fo-chen sam sair:  
suidid sine serb  
i mbi cerb caill craib.*

"The hardy vigorous cuckoo calls; welcome to noble summer: it calms bitter storms which tear branches from trees."

*Ecal aird fer fann,  
fedil focbain ucht,  
uisse ima-cain  
'Cetamain, cain cucht!'*

"The timid man fears loudness; the constant man sings from his heart; rightly he sings out, 'May Day! Fair aspect!'"

<sup>1</sup> (Preceding page) "The true seasons of the year: The season from St. Bridget's Day to May Day, the season from May Day to Lúnasa, the season from Lúnasa to Samhain, and the season from Samhain to St. Bridget's Day." pp. 219-220, *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll, George Braziller, New York, 1982.



Similar poetry praising the coming of May was written in medieval Wales. A well-known example is Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem, *Mis Mai*.<sup>2</sup>

*Duw gwyddiad mai da y gweddai / Decbreud mwyn dyfiad Mai.  
Difeth irgyrs a dyfai / Dyw Calan mis mwynlan Mai.  
Digriflaen godd a'm oedai, / Duw mawr a roes doe y Mai.  
Dillyn beirdd ni'm rhydwylai, / Da fyd ym oedd dyfod Mai.*

"God knew the richness of fresh growth would well become the beginning of May, that without fail new shoots would grow upon the Calends of the gentle month of May. Unwithered tips of boughs retarded me—yesterday great God gave May. The poets' treasured jewel would not deceive me, good was the life I had upon the coming of May."

Bealtaine or Calan Mai is also mentioned in Irish and Welsh prose literature, frequently as the starting point of the new season and new activities. The Fianna of Irish and Scottish legend, for example, left their winter quarters on Bealtaine for the wild lands where they lived as hunters and foragers until Samhain.

Quite often, May Day, like Samhain, is portrayed as a time when forces from the Otherworld can invade our own.

One of the three horrible oppressions that struck the island of Britain in the medieval Welsh tale *Lludd and Llewelys* was a "cry that resounded every May Day eve above every hearth in Britain; it went through the hearts of men and terrified them so much that men lost their color and their strength, women miscarried, sons and daughters lost their senses and all animals, forests, earth and waters were left barren." The cry was uttered by one of two supernatural beings, dragons, that were battling for possession of the land.

Another example: In the *Mabinogi* of Pwyll, one of the great medieval Welsh tales, the hero Pryderi, supernaturally stolen from his mother on the night of his birth, is rescued from a mysterious Otherworld captor on May Eve.

### Uncovering ancient myth

The tale of Pryderi, along with the other Welsh and Irish tales of the Middle Ages, was written centuries after the introduction of Christianity obscured the Pagan origins of May Day traditions. But medieval bards, lay clerks, and monks usually transcribed and modified tales that had been handed down from much earlier times, with many traditions that originated in Pagan mythology still intact. If we look closely, we can often detect an outline of the ancient mythic content of these stories.

This is especially true of *Culhwch and Olwen*, a Welsh tale built on the base of what may be considered the essential Bealtaine myth—the defeat of the forces of darkness and chaos by a young god of light—in this case represented by Culhwch—who wins the affections of a goddess of the tribe or land—ensuring the return of fertility.

This mythic pattern was expressed in the seasonal customs of various Celtic lands. On the Isle of Man, for instance, mock battles were once fought on May Day between a winter king and summer king.

<sup>2</sup>*The Pleasures of Irish Nature Poetry*, trans. Malachi McCormick, The Stone Street Press, New York, 1984.

<sup>3</sup>*Dafydd Ap Gwilym: A Selection of Poems*, trans. Rachel Bromwich, Penguin Books, England, 1985.

<sup>4</sup>*The Mabinogi and other medieval Welsh tales*, trans. and edited by Patrick K. Ford, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1977.

*Culhwch and Olwen*, of course, is not a straightforward retelling of this myth. In fact, many errant strands of mythology and tradition intertwine throughout the story. But a number of its episodes cast light on ancient mythological traditions relating to the May Day festival. Here is a very brief summary of the story:

Culhwch, the young hero, is born under extraordinary circumstances. When he comes of age, Culhwch is put under a curse by his stepmother: his flesh shall not touch a woman's until he wins the daughter of Ysbaddaden chief-giant. (The name *Ysbaddaden* is the Welsh word for hawthorn, a plant closely associated with May Day and the beginning of summer in Celtic tradition.)

He is sent to seek the assistance of his uncle, King Arthur. Arthur agrees to help him win the girl. Culhwch, along with Cei, Bedwyr, and several of Arthur's most vaunted warriors, seeks the court of Ysbaddaden and meets Olwen. She tells Culhwch that she cannot marry him without her father's consent, since Ysbaddaden must die when she marries. Culhwch and the heroes visit the giant, whose eyelids are so heavy that they must be propped up with forks to allow him to see his prospective son-in-law.

Before he agrees to consent to his daughter's marriage, Ysbaddaden demands that Culhwch complete a long list of seemingly impossible tasks, including freeing Mabon son of Modron from his imprisonment. That was going to be difficult, since no one knew where Mabon was imprisoned, or whether he was alive or dead.

With the help of Arthur and his heroes, the impossible tasks are completed. Culhwch returns, Ysbaddaden is killed, and Culhwch and Olwen are married.

### The love triangle

The mythic conflict between a grotesque winter god and a young summer god for the possession of a goddess is quite clear beneath the surface of the tale. But there are other elements of the story that underscore this particular theme.

First, the tale mentions another contest for the love of a woman—the battle between Gwynn ap Nudd and Gwythyr ap Greidawl for Creiddylad. The connection between this short tale and the mock fights held on May Day is plain:

"Creiddylad . . . went off with Gwythyr . . . but before he could sleep with her, Gwyn son of Nudd came and took her by force. Gwythyr . . . gathered a host and came to attack Gwyn . . . Gwyn won the battle . . . Arthur heard about that and came to the North. He summoned Gwyn son of Nudd to him, released his nobles from prison, and made peace between Gwyn and Gwythyr. This is the peace that was concluded: to leave the maiden unmolested by either party in her father's house, and a battle between Gwyn and Gwythyr every May first, forever, until Judgment Day, from that day forth. The one that conquered on Judgment Day would get the maiden."<sup>4</sup>

Another important episode in the story is the tale of Mabon son of Modron. His name has been equated with that of Apollo Maponus, a diety worshiped in Roman times in Britain and Gaul. He is the young god, son of Modron, or Matrona, the mother goddess. His Romano-Celtic name, of course, brings to mind Apollo Belenus. Therefore, his original role may have been similar to that of the Mac Oc in Irish tradition and Culhwch in this tale.

His imprisonment is significant. Like Pryderi, he was stolen from his mother at birth. He must be released before Culhwch can be wed to Olwen. Perhaps this points to another episode in the underlying Bealtaine myth. It may be that the young god, stolen from his mother at birth, is imprisoned in the Otherworld, and must be freed before he can wed his goddess.

Furthermore, the battle between Arthur and the pitch-black witch from the Valley of Grief in the Highlands of Hell may be interpreted as a battle with the female personification of darkness and winter, the *Cailleach* of Gaelic tradition whom we will meet again in Scotland. The pitch-black witch must also be overcome before Culhwch can wed his bride.

This ancient seasonal myth illuminating the conflict between dark and light, winter and summer, barrenness and fertility, has helped shaped the plot of countless Celtic tales and enriched European literature considerably. The battle between Lugh and Balor, for example, is strikingly similar to Culhwch's encounter with Ysbaddaden—and add to the list the conflict between Gwyn and Gwythyr for Creiddylad, the fight between Fionn and Diarmaid for the love of Grainne, Naoise and Conchobar for Deirdre, Mark and Tristan for Iseult, and Arthur, Lancelot, and half a dozen other heroes for Guinevere.

We hear strong echoes of the myth in a sixteenth-century Welsh version of the Tale of Tristan and Iseult. In the story, Trystan and Esyllt have fled to the forest of Celyddon. March, king of Cornwall and Esyllt's husband, complains to Arthur, who agrees to settle the dispute between the king and his nephew Trystan.

Arthur, always the arbitrator, arranges a settlement: one man shall have Esyllt while there are leaves on the trees, and the other when trees are leafless. March, as husband, is given the right to choose, and he picks the period when trees are leafless, thinking that winter nights are the longest.

However, it is Esyllt who makes the real choice. She tells March and Arthur that the holly, the ivy, and the yew tree always have leaves, and so she will stay with Trystan forever.

### From the bonfire to May bush

Now that we have investigated the mythic origins of Bealtaine or Calan Mai and seen how they were reflected in Celtic literature, let us examine their expression in the various May Day customs of the Celtic peoples. These customs are remarkably consistent from nation to nation, underscoring their great age and universal nature.

As mentioned earlier, bonfires were lit in all the Celtic nations on the eve of May Day. But since these were not ordinary bonfires, they could not be lit without ritual. At one time, as the Glossary of Cormac notes, the druids lit the bonfires while reciting ritual incantations. After the introduction of Christianity to the Celtic world, the bonfires were sometimes, though not always, lit by the Christian priests who had inherited the druids' authority.

In any case, the lighting of the Bealtaine bonfire was an important ritual. Obviously, since the Bealtaine fires were sacred fires of purification, they could not be fueled by torches or other fires. The fire would have to be created at the proper sacred moment. In all the Celtic lands, the fire had to be started either by friction from rubbing sticks or sparking flint and stone. In Ireland and Scotland this type of fire was called *teine-éigin*, or "need fire." In Ireland and Wales, cattle were driven between

two fires. People danced sun-wise around the bonfires, as well. They would also touch the fires, and sometimes crawl through them, to gain special blessings or luck for themselves. These practices continued through the late eighteenth century, though they mostly died out in the nineteenth century.

In Wales, Calan Mai, the Calends of May, was also known as Calan Haf, the Calends of Summer, and was considered one of the two great *Ysprydnoiau* or "spirit nights" of the year, the other being Calan Gaeaf, the Calends of Winter, the Samhain of Gaelic tradition. The Welsh, like other Celts, believed that the spirits of the dead returned to haunt the living on May Eve.

Bonfires, of course, were lit throughout Wales. This was the way it was done in the south of Wales, according to Marie Trevelyan, author of *Folk Lore and Stories from Wales*, published in 1909:

"Nine men would turn their pockets inside out and see that every piece of money and all metals were off their persons. Then the men went into the nearest woods, and collected sticks of nine kinds of trees. These were carried to the spot where the fire had to be built. There was a circle cut in the sod, and the sticks were set crosswise. All around the circle the people stood and watched the proceedings. One of the men would then take two bits of oak and rub them together until a flame was kindled. This was applied to the sticks, and soon a large fire was made. Sometimes two fires were set up side by side. These fires, whether one or two, were called *coelcerth*, or bonfire.

"Round cakes of oatmeal and brown meal were split in four, and placed in a small flour-bag, and everybody present had to pick out a portion. The last bit in the bag fell to the lot of the bag-holder. Each person who chanced to pick up a piece of brown meal cake was compelled to leap three times over the flames, or to run thrice between the two fires, by which means the people thought they were sure of a plentiful harvest. Shouts and screams of those who had to face the ordeal could be heard ever so far and those who chanced to pick the oatmeal portions sang and danced and clapped their hands in approval, as the holders of the brown bits leaped three times over the flames, or ran three times between the two fires. . . . In times gone by people would throw a calf in the fire when there was disease among the herds. The same would be done with a sheep if there was anything the matter with a flock."

Similar sacrificial practices were also noted on the Isle of Man by John Rhys in his volume, *Celtic Folklore*. He recounts how the *Caball yn Oural Losh*, the Chapel of the Burnt Sacrifice, was founded on the spot where a farmer who had lost a number of cattle and sheep to murrain "burned a calf as a propitiatory offering to the Deity." This type of sacrifice seems to have been a common practice at one time.

### Evidence of human sacrifice

The practice of selecting certain people by chance to jump over the Bealtaine fire in Wales and elsewhere, ensuring a good harvest, points to another type of sacrifice, the selection of a human victim in ancient times. The Bealtaine customs of Gaelic Scotland, as recorded in James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, may reflect ancient sacrificial customs. (Frazer's book explored the origin and survival of customs relating to human sacrifice.) Frazer's description of Bealtaine customs is striking:



"In the central Highlands of Scotland bonfires, known as the Beltane fires, were formerly kindled with the great ceremony on the first of May . . . In the neighborhood of Callandar, in Perthshire, the custom lasted down to the close of the last century (the eighteenth century). The fires were lit by the people of each hamlet on a hill or knoll round which their cattle were pasturing. Hence various eminences in the Highlands are known as 'the hill of the fires' . . . On the morning of May Day the people repaired to a hill or knoll and cut a round trench in the green sod, leaving in the center a platform of turf large enough to contain the whole company. On this turf they seated themselves, and in the middle was placed a pile of wood or other fuel, which of old they kindled with *tein-eigin* (sic)—that is, forced fire or need fire."

According to Frazer, the way of making the "need fire" was this: "The night before, all the fires in the country were carefully extinguished, and the next morning the materials for exciting this sacred fire were prepared." On the islands of Skye, Mull, and Tiree, a well-seasoned plank of oak was procured, Frazer wrote, and a hole bored in its middle. A wimble of the same timber was placed in the hole and rotated to create the friction needed to spark the sacred flame.

In some parts of mainland Scotland, he noted, a large frame of green wood was built, with an axle-tree in its center. A crew was recruited to turn the axle tree. "In some places three times three persons, in others three times nine, were required for turning round, by turns, the axle tree," Frazer recorded. "If any of them had been guilty of murder, adultery, theft, or other atrocious crime, it was imagined either that the fire would not kindle, or that it would be devoid of its usual virtue."

Frazer continued: "So soon as any sparks were emitted by means of the violent friction, they applied a species of agaric which grows on old birch-trees and is very combustible. This fire had the appearance of being immediately derived from heaven, and manifold were the virtues ascribed to it. They (the Highlanders) esteemed it as a preservative against witchcraft, and a sovereign remedy against malignant diseases, both in the human species and in cattle, and by it the strongest poisons were supposed to have their natures changed. . . .

"The fire being lit, the company prepared a custard of eggs and milk, which they ate. Afterwards they amused themselves a while by singing and dancing around the fire. Then they knead a cake of oatmeal, which is toasted at the embers against a stone. After the custard is eaten up they divide the cake into so many portions, as similar as possible to one another in size and shape, as there are persons in the company. They daub one of these portions all over with charcoal until it be perfectly black. They put all the bits of cake into a bonnet. He who holds the bonnet is entitled to the last bit. Whoever draws the black bit was called the *Cailleach Bealtaine* . . . upon his being known, part of the company laid hold of him, and made a show of putting him into the fire; but the majority interposing, he was rescued. And in some places they laid him flat on the ground, making as if they would quarter him. Afterwards he was pelted with eggshells, and retained the odious appellation (of the *Cailleach*) during the whole year. And while they feast was fresh in people's memory, they affected to speak of the *Cailleach Bealtaine* as dead. He had to leap three times through the flames, and this concluded the ceremony."

The designation of the unfortunate loser in this Scottish lottery, almost identical with the Welsh custom described earlier, as the *Cailleach Bealtaine*, the hag of Bealtaine, who must be killed to protect the harvest and cattle, reminds one of

the requirement that Arthur kill the pitch-black witch from the Highlands of Hell before Culhwch can marry Olwen.

The *Cailleach*, even when represented by a man in latter day ceremonies, would seem to be the female personification of winter and barrenness. The means used to choose the "*cailleach*" were probably extremely ancient. Evidence provided by Lindow Man, a Celt from early Roman times found in a state of near-perfect preservation in an English bog, points to their antiquity. An autopsy of the man, who had been strangled, bludgeoned, and stabbed, found a piece of burnt bannock cake in his stomach. Celticist Anne Ross believes Lindow Man was a druid sacrificed to help prevent the Roman conquest of Britain.

Another Scottish May Day custom concerning the baking of bannock cakes was meant to propitiate forces that could destroy flocks and herds. An eighteenth-century traveller in the Highlands left this record of the custom, which was included by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*:

"On the first of May the herdsmen of every village hold their Beltien (sic), a rural sacrifice. They cut a square trench on the ground, leaving the turf in the middle; on that they make a fire of wood, on which they dress a large caudle of eggs, butter, oatmeal, and milk, and bring, besides the ingredients of the caudle, plenty of beer and whiskey; for each of the company must contribute something. The rites begin with the spilling of some of the caudle on the ground, by way of libation; on that every one takes a cake of oatmeal, upon which are raised nine square knobs, each dedicated to some particular being, the supposed preserver of their flocks and herds, or to some particular animal, the real destroyer of them; each person then turns his face to the fire, breaks off a knob, and, flinging it over his shoulder, says, 'this I give to thee, preserve thou my horses; this to thee, preserve thou my sheep; and so on.' After that they use the same ceremony to the noxious animals: 'This I give to thee, O fox! spare thou my lambs; this to thee, O hooded crow! this to thee, O eagle!'"

#### Charms & countercharms

May Day, and May Eve, were also times when witches, those who used magic for their own profit and their neighbors harm, could work their spells to steal the "luck" from fields and home alike. It was a time of charms and countercharms.

In the Highlands of Scotland, a May Day tradition known as "burning the witches" was continued into the eighteenth century. Young men would take bits of flaming material on pitchforks into the fields and run through them yelling, "Fire! Fire! Burn the Witches!" The object was to protect crops from the spells of malignant magicians who would steal the fertility of crops, cattle, and produce. The fire was scattered in the fields to flush out any witches that might be waiting in the shape of hares or other animals to steal the fertility of the fields as summer returned on May Day. In the process, such practices increased the fertility of the fields by burning off old growth and clearing the way for new crops to grow.

A similar practice was found on the Isle of Man, where gorse was burnt from the fields on the first morning in May. Trumpets and horns were blown at dawn, and guns fired, to send witches and the fairy host packing. In Man and Ireland women would went out before dawn to collect the May dew, or the first water from the well—*barra-bua an tobair*—which had potent magical properties and could secure luck, a fair complexion, and protection from witches. If the "top-victory of the well" fell into the wrong hands, however, it go be used to do harm.

It was also a custom in all Celtic lands to gather certain



flowers and branches on May Day morning. Hawthorn and rowan, especially, were gathered, and hung over doors to homes and byres as a ward against enchantment. On Man, rowan branches were carried clockwise three times around the Bealtaine bonfire and then brought home. Small crosses made of rowan were even tied to the tails of cattle.

In parts of Ireland, farmers would make a circuit of their property, sowing seed sprinkled with the first well-water or holy water at the four cardinal points, starting at the east. Cows were also examined carefully and sprinkled with the first well-water or holy water for protection. Animals were often blessed on May Eve to protect them from harm that night. The wise farmer searched his property carefully for any sign of witches' work. Cattle were sometimes bled, primarily for health reasons. In 1855 the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* noted that "On May Eve the peasantry used to drive all their cattle into old raths and forts thought to be much frequented by the fairies, bleed them, taste their blood, and pour the remainder on the earth."

Butter—a valuable commodity—was guarded with zeal. Witches could steal butter in many ways; one was to gather dew with a cream skimmer from the grass on a farm, and then utter a charm commanding the butter to come:

"The tops of the grass and the roots of the corn  
Give me the neighbor's milk night and morn."

Witches could steal butter by charming the smoke rising from a neighbor's house on May Day morning. One spell was worked by reciting the charm *Im an deataigh sin ar mo chuid bainne*—"The butter of that smoke upon my milk."

There were all types of countercharms to protect crops and produce from harm, a simple one being the phrase *Dia idir sinn agus an t-olc*, or "God between us and harm." Other types of prayers and rituals were more complex.

The picking and bringing home of fresh flowers, along with branches of rowan, hawthorn, hazel, and holly, was an important custom. In Ireland, young women returning home with the flowers would sing *Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn*—"We have brought the Summer with us."

*Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn*  
*Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn*  
*Thugamar linn é is cé bhaineadh dinn é*  
*Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn.*

*Samhradh, Samhradh, bainne na ngambna*  
*Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn*  
*Samhradh buí ó lúf na gréine*  
*Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn.*

*Cuilleann is coll, trom is caorthann*  
*Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn*  
*Is fuinseóg glégeal ó bhéal an átha*  
*Thugamar féin an Samhradh linn*

"We have brought the summer with us/We have brought the summer with us/We've brought it with us and who'll take it from us?/We have brought the summer with us."

"Summer, summer, milk of the young cows/We have brought the summer with us/Bright summer from the sunset/We have brought the summer with us."

"Holly and hazel, elder and rowan/We have brought the summer with us/And bright ash from beside the ford/We have brought the summer with us."

Another popular custom in some sections of Ireland—particularly in Leinster and parts of Ulster and Munster—was the decoration of the May Bush, typically a branch or part of an appropriate tree or shrub, with ribbons, flowers, candles, and bits of eggshells. The bush was placed in front of the house, or at the crossroads, or the market square of a town or village. Bushes were often set up by rival groups of youths, and were the subject of bitter and violent faction fights in Dublin at one time. Attempts were made to steal a rival group's bush, thereby stealing the luck conferred by the bush from its owners.

The custom of the May Bush may be related to that of the May Pole, a traditional part of May Day celebrations in parts of Ireland and some other Celtic countries and in England as well. The May Pole may have been introduced into Ireland from England and Wales. It was most popular in the areas of the country settled or influenced by the Anglo-Normans and their followers: Leinster and the Midlands.

In northern Wales, the May Pole custom was called *Y Gangen Haf* (the summer branch); in southern Wales, it was known as *Codi'r Fedwen* (raising the birch). May, or "summer" dances, *dawnsio haf*, were held, and in some places, a dance known as *dawns y fedwen*, the dance of the birch. According to Marie Trevelyan, May dancing continued in northeast Wales until the end of the last century.

In south Wales the May Pole was painted different colors, and ribbons wrapped about it during the dance. Poles were also decorated with flowers. Some dances were quite complex, and involved groups travelling from one pole to another throughout a town. Some poles were carried through towns "with much singing and merriment" before being set up for the dance.

A different type of custom was common in the north, where thirteen young men would dress in white clothes decorated with ribbons and travel about performing the May dance. One young man would carry the *cangen haf* (summer branch), which replaced the May Pole, while others played the *crwth* (a stringed instrument similar to the fiddle or viol) and harp. Two of the group played characters called the Fool and the *Cadi*, whose comic antics were similar to those of "Punch and Judy" (known in Welsh tradition, naturally, as *Pwnsh* and *Siwan*). The *Cadi* has been described as a "marshal, orator, buffoon, and money collector." According to Trevelyan, the *Cadi* would be dressed in male and female clothing, with a hideous mask or blackened face with red cheeks and lips. The group of men would travel from farmhouse to farmhouse, performing and collecting money at each.

This custom is connected to the carolling tradition so strong in Wales and Cornwall. Caroling was a popular May Day tradition in both countries. Cornwall, in particular, is renowned for the dances performed at Padstow and Helston in early May. In Padstow, a man dressed in a hobby-horse costume—the "Old Oss"—and a character known as "the teaser" lead a dance through the streets, starting at midnight. The Padstow Horse and his followers sing the May Day Song, which may have originally been sung in Cornish.

A May Pole is erected in the center of the town, and at about ten o'clock on May morning the horse and his followers carouse through the town. Their procession includes a "death scene," in which the horse dies and is revived. The teaser is typically dressed as a sailor, but in old times was sometimes dressed in male and female clothing, like the Welsh *Cadi*.

A similar ceremony was kept up in Brittany, where Le Cheval Mallet, a wooden horse decorated with flowers, was carried around a May Pole during May Day dancing.

The Hal-an-Tow dance was performed at Helston on the eighth of May. It featured characters including Robin Hood, St. Michael, and a dragon. It lapsed in the nineteenth century, but was revived in the 1930s. The Hal-an-tow song is quite famous. The following verses were published by Peter Kennedy in *Folksongs of Britain and Ireland*:

*Robin Hood and Little John  
They both are gone to Fair, O  
And we will go to the merry greenwood  
to see what they do there, O  
And for to chase, O  
To chase the buck and doe.*

*Hal-an-tow Jolly Rumble, O  
For we are up as soon as any day, O  
And for to fetch the summer home  
The summer and the May, O  
For summer is a come, O  
and winter is a gone, O.*

After reviewing just a few of the May Day customs and beliefs of the Celts, one has to ask, how did all these traditions, with their roots in ancient religious rituals, survive for centuries after Christianity had replaced Paganism?

The answer lies in the way Christianity was introduced to the Celtic world. In Celtic Britain and Ireland, Christianity was spread gradually by missionaries and monastics who brought

people to their faith by example, rather than coercion.

For the most part, there was little persecution of Pagans in the Celtic world (there was some persecution of Christians by Roman authorities), despite the claims of some contemporary neo-Pagans who, at one extreme, prefer to believe in an unsubstantiated "burning time," and some historians who, at the other extreme, would prefer to believe that medieval monks who supposedly wrote about ancient Pagan traditions "made it all up."

As Peter Beresford Ellis notes in *Celtic Inheritance*, his study of Celtic Christianity, the druids and bards gradually absorbed Christian doctrine. "In a short space of time, it was the druids who became the Christian priests, the bards who became the scribal monks." For example, St. Columba, or Colm Cille, is traditionally said to have been educated in one of the bardic schools that preserved many Pagan traditions. He later supported those schools against their detractors at the Synod of Drum Ceatt in 590 A.D.

Many of the old traditions connected to Samhain, Bealtaine, and the other Pagan holidays were tolerated and adopted by the new religion as Christian doctrine was fused with native custom and belief during the early centuries of the Middle Ages. The people who practiced the customs certainly considered themselves Christians. Many of these customs survived without interference until the Reformation. Others fell into disuse or disappeared as the Celtic peoples were conquered and partially assimilated by the English and French.

For example, as the use of English spread in Ireland, the traditions and customs that had been preserved and transmitted through generations in Irish were often forgotten or frowned upon as "backward" or irrelevant.

Let us hope that the current resurgence of interest in Celtic myth and custom will ensure that at least some of the traditions associated with Bealtaine and Calan Mai will survive.

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