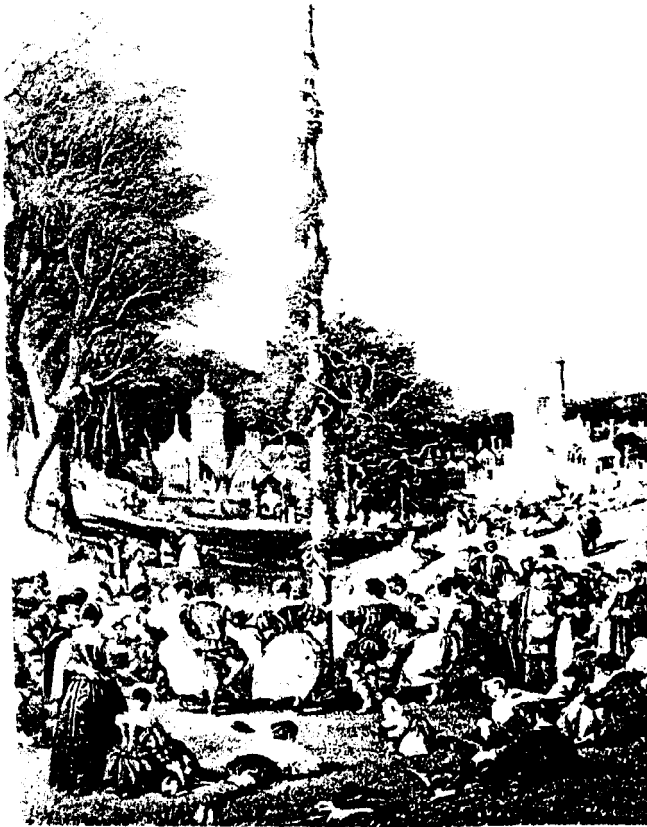


Beltane in Britain

01988, Tana Culain, .K.A.M.



May Day Song (Traditional)

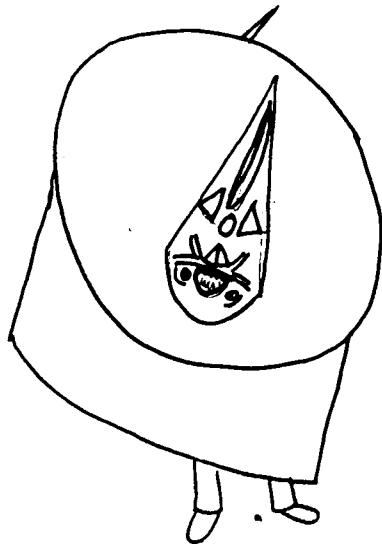
*I've been a wandering all this night
And the best part of the day
And when I come back home again
I will bring you a branch of May.*

*A branch of May I bring you here
And at your door I stand.
It's nothing but a sprout
But it's well budded-out
By the work of the Gods own hands.*

Beltane, or May Day, is one of the few holidays left in England and North America which has managed to remain almost exclusively Pagan. Yule was absorbed into Christmas, Hallows into All Souls and Halloween, Spring Equinox into Easter and so on around the calendar. But May Day has remained a Pagan holiday, and all attempts to whitewash it or tone it down have only added fuel to the fire, in this case the "bright fire" that the Celtic Beltane becomes in English translation. It is the first day of summer.

If you visit the village of **Padstow** in Cornwall for May Day you will see and perhaps join in an ancient ritual. At dawn the **Padstow** Hobby Horse, or "Old 'Oss", emerges from his stable at the Red Lion **IM** and prances through the streets, preceded by scores of accordions and drums, followed by cheering throngs.

The men that animate the almost dragonlike black canvas drum that forms the 'Oss's body are from **particular** village families; the honor is hereditary. Through all the hours of daylight the 'Oss dances through the village, "riding" his different men, sampling the odd pint of beer at each pub, spurred along by male and female "teasers" waving a small replica of the 'Oss on a stick.



The evening before, most of the village gathers branches of "May", tying them to building posts and doorways. A crowd begins to build outside the "Lion", so thick in the Inn and street outside that pints of ale are being passed through the pub's sidewalk-level windows, along with the occasional drinker. When the time is right the evening song is sung en masse in anticipation of the dawn. The streets are thronged, the crowds drunken and ebullient. An enormous maypole is bedecked just up the hill from the butcher's. At daybreak the sleepy fishing port seems to have **magickally** budded overnight.

At times during the day the 'Oss represents the old God, and every so often he sinks to the ground, as if dead. The crowd woos him back to life with cheers and shouts, and he springs erect as a new, young God, amid much music and hurrah. Any young woman "captured" by the hobby horse and held under

his skirts for even a second is said to be guaranteed a child within the year.

The "team" of villagers attending the 'Oss, playing the music, teasing, dancing him through the streets are dressed all in white with bold red sashes. Called the "Red Team", these families have been selected to tend the 'Oss over the years. The white symbolizes the Sun, red the sap and blood of life. The 'Oss himself is black, for the Old God must die in order for the New God to return with the Sun and bring new life for another year.

A "Blue Team" was founded after the First War and built their own 'Oss as a part of the Temperance Movement. Membership in the "Blue Team" is far less restrictive, and while their spirit doesn't **seem** to rival the "Reds", they do seem to have mellowed over the years.

Naturally **Padstow** has a Maypole. Many other villages and towns in Britain also erect the red and white totem of fertility, harking back to the **tree** worship of earlier days. Villages tend to limit the dancing to the Maypoles now, but there were times long ago when the **bonfire**, or Bel's fire was the center of the May Day dance. Maypoles are often made of hawthorn, representing the joy of summer's return.

The "Green Man" or "Jack in the Green" is often depicted

with a wreath of hawthorn around his face, and hawthorn leaves sprouting in profusion from his mouth, eyes and ears. Sometimes he is found on older English churches, often at the Pagan North Door, a token of how superficial the conversion of the Pagan masons must have been.



In villages like Dorset's Ceme Abbas, all who had the desire went up the hill, or "Up Giant" on May Eve. There, at the head of the enormous Guardian carved in the chalk hillside, they danced about the great bonfire to welcome back the sun. The great naked God remains carved into the hill today, refreshed religiously by the village and National Trust, and obviously quite ready to rise to the Great Rite. The God, perhaps a relative of Windsor Forest's **Herne** the Hunter, was carved from the chalk by the Celtic tribes around 500 B.C.E. To this day He is a visible source of benevolence and protection.

After the fire dance people retired into the woods below. Couples often emerged the next morning at dawn, bedecked with flowers and little else. A 1583 puritan observer growled "Hundreds of men, women and children go off to the woods and groves and spend all the night in pastimes, and in the morning return with birch boughs and branches of trees to deck their assemblies withal." The sex wasn't just simple and blessed carnality — it was sympathetic **magick** to encourage animals and plants to go and do likewise!

Babes born nine months after were regarded as a special gift from the God on the hill, not necessarily fathered by one's mate. Intercourse on the Giant's phallus has long been regarded as a sure way to obtain a child within the year. The Celts, like the northern **Picts** and many other peoples living on the margin of tribal survival had a strong interest in keeping the population up at all costs. People, cattle, crops — all had to multiply steadily in order for life to continue.

Morris Dancing is enjoying a resurgence in popularity in England and North America year round, although there are definitely special performances at Beltane. Men and women, dressed in colorful "kit", dance to concertinas, accordions and drum, often rhythmically beating the ground with great staffs to wake the Earth to bud and flower. My husband once viewed a Women's team at sunset as they floated above the field, wheeling through the turns and twists of the

dance. Despite the clamor of the instruments they seemed to glide in eerie silence, like maenads of a forbidden rite. He felt lucky to get out alive. Great way to raise a cone of power — I should know, as I was one of the dancers.



The Celts hardly invented Beltane — the holiday has lived like a welcome guest in many other civilizations. The Romans celebrated the beginning of summer in early May, calling the festival **Floralia** in honor of Flora, the Goddess of spring and flowering plants. Children wore garlands of fresh-picked flowers to Flora's scented temple, dancing about a marble column and strewing flowers on Her Altar. The wreath of flowers worn by the Spring Maiden in many Equinox traditions harks back to Her youthful worshippers.

In Scotland the shepherds and cowherders blessed their animals on Beltane by making special cakes and ale. Some of the cake was thrown over the shoulder, bit by bit, as a libation. With each piece thrown a different predator

was called upon — the fox, the crow, the eagle — and asked to spare the flock. Along the coast, entire fishing villages wove flower garlands, casting them upon the waves far out to sea to encourage a good catch.

Robin of the Wood (Robin Hood), Jack in the Green, St. George, Green George, the King of May, the Green Man

... all of these beloved dancers are the faces of a single Persona — the God of Summer. Cloaked in green or wicker or disguised as a Hobby Horse, his Will is the same — the return of life and growth after the deathlike Winter is past.

Even the United States has a God of Summer, worshipped in millions of homes and displayed in talismanic form to keep foods wholesome and pure. I speak, of course, of Himself, the Jolly Green **Giant! Ho Ho Ho! Lucky Maid Marion.**