

Candlemas in Britain

01990, Tana Culain ·K·A·M

While February 2, Candlemas, is not the major Wiccan holiday in most circles, I find it an extremely pure, simple, and touching one. Also known as Oimeic, Imbolc, or Lady Day, it is a Goddess-oriented holiday. In Ireland the day is referred to as St. Bridget's Day, in Scotland it is Briid's Day, and in England it is Bride's Day.

Bridget was pure faery (translate Goddess), and lived in the base of a giant oak tree, taking care of all the woodland animals. In Ireland special cakes called **barin breac** are still served on Bridget's Eve. In Scotland on Briid's Eve a sheaf of oat was dressed as a woman and laid in a basket with a wooden club at its side. The women said "Briid is come! Briid is welcome!" then went to bed. In the morning they went to the hearth to look for the impression of Briid's club in the ashes. If they found it, it meant good crops for the coming year. On the Isle of Man, women stood at their doors with bundles of rushes and invited Briid to cross the threshold. Rushes on the floor made a pathway to lead Her to the hearth, and candles burned all night in Her honor.

In London there was a well named for Her — Bride's Well. It once existed in what is now Fleet Street. All that is left today is a church called St. Bride's. But at one

point in the 1500's King Henry VIII had an entire palace erected near the well. It was called Bridewell Palace and stood close to the Temple, erected by the Knights Templar in 1185. It is interesting to note that the **Templars**, nominally Catholic, were in reality a Mystery School closely related to the Freemasons.

By 1800 in England, Lady Day had come to refer to March 21 — "Annunciation Day", and was an important day for agricultural hiring fairs. As the Virgin Mary was said to have been impregnated on Annunciation Day, the connection to the Wiccan custom of celebrating the new fertility of the Goddess on Candlemas is very strong.



The proximity of Bride's Well and the Temple of DeMolay's Templar Knights again bears out the observation that wherever there is a God-oriented monument, a Goddess-oriented well is usually close by. Today it is mostly the phallic monuments that are lauded, but they do not "stand" alone. After all, no male could maintain a pose like that for over 2 millennium if his truly deserving mate were not nearby.

Candlemas as we celebrate it may date back to the Roman festival on February 5th, which was the first day of Spring. The Romans regarded this day as the turning point in the year, a promise of new birth after the long winter sleep. February comes from the Roman Februarius, which comes from Februa, or purification. In

this case the purification would be a sort of "spring cleaning" to clear the way for the new life to come.

The Romans celebrated another holiday in February — Lupercalia, aimed primarily at promoting the fertility of women. It was in part a festival of purification — not as an attempt to repent of "sin", which is a Christian concept, but as a practical way of wiping the slate clean with one's Gods and inducing future well-being.

Part of Lupercalia involved the ritual sacrifice of two goats and a dog. Sacred cakes were offered, and two young men were chosen to run naked through the crowds, striking all bystanders with thongs. It was especially important to strike the women, probably as a way of marking them as potentially fertile. There are some similarities between this festival and the **Padstow** May Day, still being celebrated in Cornwall. In **Padstow** a Hobby Horse dances through the village on May 1st, occasionally catching young women under his skirts and marking them with blacking.

The Roman Lupercalia lasted in some form until A.D. 494, when it was suppressed by Pope **Gelasius I**, who converted it into the Feast of Purification of the Virgin Mary. This did not stop people all over Europe, who were not yet converted, from continuing to celebrate the eve of the day with candlelight processions aimed at purifying the fields prior to the sowing season. They called it a feast of lights and often ended up back in the villages after their sojourn in the fields, carrying their blazing torches up and down the streets. The next day was a day for saying farewell to darkness, prophesying the weather, and taking down the holly,

rosemary, bay, and mistletoe. Bright sunshine on this day was a bad omen

The Basques in the Pyrenees still celebrate Candlemas by having a man dressed a bear emerge from a nearby river and charge about through the crowds, grabbing at the girls and ripping up

from the young men with the thongs from the Roman Lupercalia.

Some of our Valentine's Day practices are probably related to the Roman **Lupercalian** rite of drawing lots for partners. It is rather pleasant to think that in schools all over America children are engaged in what appears to be the Pagan ritual of distributing Valentines



double-faced "monsters" stuffed with sawdust and decorated with bells and garlic leaves. The bear is ritually killed and carried away to the sound of a funeral dirge played by bagpipes and drums. Good-bye to winter! I would not be surprised if the bear was directly descended

from big cardboard boxes much the same way lots were distributed over two thousand years ago.

To this day in some Catholic parts of Europe, candles distributed on February 2 are kept at home to use for their curative powers and as a protection against storms and earthquakes. In Eng-

land's West Country, Candlemas is supposed to be the first day on which tiny white flowers called snowdrops appear.

In the United States and England it is the day on which you can start looking for the first signs of spring. I like to go out on Candlemas morning and stand in the woods, usually in the mud, and envision the seeds and bulbs below ground, already sprouting but not yet pushing our into the air. When I walk out into the woods on this day I can actually hear the plants growing, even when there is snow on the ground.

In most parts of Europe, the old belief is that hibernating animals wake up and come out on Candlemas. If it is cloudy they will not be frightened and they will stay above ground from then on, bringing an early Spring. But if it is sunny they will be frightened by their shadows and run back into the Earth for 40 more days of winter. In Europe the animal responsible for all of this was the badger. Settlers who came to America had to make do with the groundhog. Thus we end up in America celebrating Groundhog Day on Candlemas with a **Lupercalia**—an abhorrence of sunshine:

***"If Candlemas Day be fair
and bright
Winter will take another
flight.
If Candlemas Day be cloud
and rain
Winter is gone and will not
come again."***