

FIRES OF BEL-THE CELTIC MIDSUMMER

by

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The westernmost hilltop in Britain, Carn Brea near Land's End, commands a magnificent view over the last thin crescent of moorland before this island plunges into a great wedge of the Atlantic ocean. This is the place to come for a sunset, especially when the sea is absolutely calm and silky, when the sinking sun bottoms into her, spreading a fan of colour like hot oil across the transparent plate of water. Artists come here for the quality of light, especially the twilight, which is so thin and clear during the day and then soaks up rich colours at sunrise and sunset because of the reflective quality of the sea which surrounds the peninsula.

It is just after sunset, in the twilight zone, that the traditional Celtic day begins. After sunset and before sunrise, when light and dark are sweetly mixed, is a time of magic, of the melting of boundary between reality and illusion, of the powerful, intrusive presence of an other world. Like the day, that draws its breath at twilight, so the Celtic year is a round that can be divided - a huge cyclic breath that begins with the year's in-spiration on the eve of February 1st, the twilight of Spring;

Imbolc or Oimele. (Specifically, sunset on January 31st marks the beginning of this quarter-day, the same applying to the other three quarter-days mentioned below). The festival day of Imbolc was Christianised as Candlemas. The great breath of Nature is drawn in fully at the twilight of Summer, May 1st eve: Beltane (Christianised as Whit-sunday). With this in-spiration, Nature is fully charged and gives forth her fruits and warmth through the Summer. By August 1st eve: Lughnasad (Lammas), she releases her breath and sinks into rest on the ex-halation of Autumn and Winter twilight. Then her fruits die or rest, the Winter twilight being celebrated as Samhain (November 1st eve, All Souls or Hallowe'en). At Imbolc, her Spring renewal begins, and the yearly round is complete.

For the Iron Age settled Celtic farmers, this annual cycle celebrated an agricultural year, and replaced the older (Palaeolithic) cycle of hunter-gatherers that followed the observed fixed points of the year as shortest, longest and balanced days of dark in relationship to light - the cycle of equinoxes and solstices. In the Celtic cycle,

Imbolc celebrates the breaking of the birth-waters of ewes in lambing, and the lactation of ewes in feeding their young. The ceremonies associated with Imbolc then centre on fertility of the woman, on ovulation, childbirth and breast-feeding, the fruiting or beginning growth of the new year. Such a time is sacred to water (birth-waters and the springs of life), so holy wells are venerated, and the day is given over to Brigid, goddess of childbirth and all growing things.

Beltane, literally "the fire of Bel", celebrated the health and fertility of cattle moving on to good pasture. Twin fires were lit on hilltops and the herds driven between them for fertility and purification. As the Imbolc ceremony goes into the valley of the well of the goddess, so the Beltane ceremony moves away from the pregnant mother to the virile father, and moves up the hilltop, closer to the sky-fathers, to thunder and lightning. Bel or Belenus is an aspect of the Dagda, the thunder-god (Zeus, Thor, Jupiter, Indra), and "tan" or "tane" has the universal meaning of an ending by death, cutting off a head or sloughing off a skin, in other words, a rebirth or major change. St. Michael and St. George are the tanners who cut off the head of the serpent/dragon for its skin, or rather to have conversation with its **changes**. The skin shedding of the serpent is an allusion to the monthly changes of the woman at menstruation, and so the hilltop hero is asking the woman of the valley, whose birth process and wellspring

was honoured at spring twilight, to teach him of the meaning of her blood-changes.

Lugnasad, sacred to the hermaphroditic, mercurial god Lugh, is the time of the holy marriage of the goddess and god, woman and man, where well water meets hilltop fire in a festival of dance, theatre, song and poetry, dedicated to air, and communication between peoples. For the Celts, this was the first harvest, where the fruits of the union between earth-mother and sky-father were culled. Samhain is sacred to the child born of the union of woman and man, and is dedicated to the earth, as the year moves into Winter twilight and Nature rests. Here, cattle were brought in to shelter for the Winter. In this time of bedding down, anybody, taking on the potential of the child, could choose to alter form, shape or destiny, so this became the witching time, when the otherworld would mix inextricably with this world, and life and death would be inseparable. In underground fogous, as birth chambers and natural orgone accumulators, the mysteries of death-and-rebirth are made known to those who wish to know.

For many years at Beltane, fires were lit on top of hills such as Carn Brea all over the Celtic world. A chain of hilltops would be linked through Cornwall until this last fire, at the westernmost edge, at the jumping-off point to the otherworld, was lit. This last fire pointed to the Scilly Isles, where more burial mounds are packed into this small acreage than anywhere else in

Britain. This was the final land of the dead, setting with moon and sun, who would rise in the eternal cycle of death and life, released from the bodily death of this world into the full life of the soul, perhaps to choose a fleshly existence once more, on another round of learning, having re-assembled the neglected soul in the Isles of the Blessed. With the intrusion of Christianity, such hilltop fires lost their purpose, both the immediate one of purifying cattle, and the wider one of symbolic beacon. The retreat into church turned a back on the natural temples of the landscape.

For a number of years, sometimes alone, sometimes within a group, we have kept alive an annual ceremonial cycle (the solstice and equinox solar year; the Celtic quarter-days solar year and the Celtic tree cycle lunar year). Our ceremonies have sometimes been short and simple, at other times long and elaborate, complementing the psychological and artistic work we also pursue. Last year several of us planned a two-part celebration of May: a Beltane ceremony with traditional hilltop twin fires on Carn Brea, and a maypole ceremony for later in the month in celebration of the flowering of the Maythorn. The Beltane ceremony was to follow-up a well ceremony we had carried out at Imbolc.

Having spent most of the day in a howling wind hauling wood up the long path that winds around the hill, at twilight several families and their dogs gathered to light the twin fires,

to dance between them, to sing, and to invoke the powers of thunder and lightning in simple ceremony. The men stayed on late to tend the fires, while the women, bearing firebrands, walked to a nearby well to divine in the water as the fires blazed on the hill, marrying the two elements.

In the middle of the month, on the Celtic lunar tree cycle, we move into celebration of the blossoming hawthorn or maythorn. Our maypole ceremony begin with asking a stately ash tree if she would give-away one particularly tall, thick branch that we could dress as our maypole, to be used for many years to come. Over a day, adults and children painted the thirty-foot pole with whatever came intuitively, rather than the traditional stripes. The pole was forked at the top, representing the balance always present in Nature: death-life, feminine-masculine, shadow-light, underworld-upperworld, and so on. We also prepared coloured ribbons to dress the pole.

In a field near our house we have built a large stone circle and tree-ring that acts as our ceremonial site. In an earlier ceremony, we planted crystals in the middle of the circle in honour of Arianrhod, goddess of the silver wheel (mirroring the Great Bear constellation that circles the tip of the imaginary world-tree at the north pole). Our maypole would be planted off-centre to avoid disturbing the crystals. We hadn't realised how difficult it would be to erect the pole - it was so

cumbersome and we had to make sure it was deeply rooted. Four of us heaved and jiggled the pole into a pit, wedging it with wooden staves. The symbolism of the clumsy male within the circle of the patient woman was evident! As the wind freshened, the coloured streamers attached to the tip of the pole unfurled and flapped against the clear sky, like long tails of a kite, making spectacular cracking sounds. The pole itself audibly hummed - there was a long moment where we all stood in awe and gazed at the beautiful sight we had created, a moment of deep, resonant silence and wonder.

The ribbons were to be our umbilical cords, as dancers, attaching us to the mother-tree, to the navel or omphalos of the world. The maypole is a twin reality - both an obvious phallus celebrating the fertile growth from Spring into Summer, and the navel/womb of the Mother who births us (who we celebrate as we dance at her centre, our source). In the dance, we remind ourselves of our own births, our coming out of the mother; our dignity as we move away from her to our own individuality, but also our humility as we heel-toe-heel-toe back to her in a round dance of communion.



The hawthorn month is sacred to the goddess Cardea, or Oestre (Easter), the original May-queen of woman's fertility. The children dressed up as May-queens with beautiful flower crowns. The May bride is traditionally the young woman coming into fertility (so the maythorn pricks and raises blood -

the first period and blood at first intercourse). Her white flower reminds the woman of the keeper of childbirth, who is a "virginal" goddess (her sister-hood remains untainted, unmanipulated by men): the bear-goddess Arianrhod or Artemis. (Her milky stars form the mutton leg, the thigh of the sky-

goddess at the top of which is the source of the starry heavens of the north, the pole). Her son is the quintessential hero Arthur, whose name means "son of the bear", and whose vitality the maypole must also represent, as phallus.

The maypole is also centre of the maze (maze-pole), which is the confusing dance of life with its twists and turns, blind-alleys and through-roads to a centre that is the Self. This is each individual's potential - who we might become. The dance is also then the tortuous motions of the soul that shadows you through life, and which dances away at death, the double, devil or shadow. Ignorant as we were of the traditions of morris-dancing or maypole-dancing, we made up our own steps. as we moved along, sometimes dancing as a group, sometimes moving individually to the centre to touch the tree, and back, all the time holding our umbilical ribbons. Mostly it was plain lighthearted fun seeing ourselves tangling up, but within this were moments of chilling beauty, such as the ribbons spontaneously wrapping in absolutely perfect pattern around the pole, and then unwinding just as perfectly as we found a harmony and rhythm between ourselves. There was also the moment when one of the dancers, who had trained in the circus, shinned up the pole and performed acrobatics at the top of the gently swaying ash.

So what is the purpose of renewing these ceremonies? Why not treat Mayday in a more political fashion? Isn't this sort of thing a defence against the reality of the political and social world? Our feeling is that much of the injustice and interpersonal strife we see around us arises from a lack of the transpersonal perspective becoming a living **reality** in people's lives. Personal sense of loss or alienation may be a disease of faith - not in the sense of dogmatic belief, but in the true sense of the word "religion": **re-ligio**, "I tie back to a source" or reconnect with a centre (the Self). Every individual finds her own way to reconnect with a source that provides for personal inspiration, creative life and richness and variety of experience; and at the centre of this, every person must find their own way of facing the knowledge and certainty of death. Some connection to the collective source seems vital for personal well-being of the psyche, and ceremony can help to re-establish such links. Apart from raising awareness about the environment (most of our ceremonies involve environmental action such as tree-planting or tending holy wells), self-awareness, self-confrontation and seeking of personal inspiration are at the core of this work. All ceremonies involve healing in its widest sense.

When a ship sends out a Mayday distress signal, available help will flock altruistically to the distressed, like a gathering about a maypole.

When the hawthorn flowers, we gather around her because the goddess Beauty has shown herself. Whether distress or beauty urge, all of us at some time turn to a source for sustenance, a place of succour or comfort, a straight pole to lean against. It is good to find that place of strength within the Self as well as

the community. Mayday is a reminder of that navel which we can contemplate and strengthen in ourselves, instead of falling asleep on our source, which is also our major re-source. Beltane fire-hopping and maypole-bopping are just two ways to jog our memories.

PERSPECTIVES

I hope that the editor is right. That this spring will be the start of a whole new era. I am a sceptic about this sort of change. My experience suggests to me that we will have to muddle on for quite a while. I do not in anyway want to diminish what can be achieved with faith, for it **can** achieve miracles; the word is used deliberately.

Let me start with a story: ONCE upon a time. All that was good was white, all that was bad was black. All went well for a while. Then there arose an argument which caused great turmoil. Some of the clever bad guys noticed that some of the good guys got it wrong sometimes. They formed a union to say that GOOD was only valid if it was also right. The good guys argued that good was naturally right. The bad guys insisted that however good, they must sometimes be wrong. A conference was called to establish order.

During the process a bunch of YINS started the idea that apart from good and bad, or even right and wrong, **they** were losing out. The yangs who tended to be good and therefore white, felt this was an unnecessary complication and refused to consider the issue. The conference is still in process but as some of the young ones were not invited and did not know whether they were good or bad, or black or white, or yin or yang, they just got angry.

We are in a period of time when we must insist that not only must the joy of celebration be respected, but our anger must also be recognised.

Jeremy Style
