

A Garland of Seasonal Festivals



WHILE modern Wiccans and Neo-Pagans celebrate all eight seasonal festivals of the Wheel of the Year, most books and articles on the subject seem to concentrate on the four major ones – Imbolg, Beltane, Lughnassad and Samhain. These are of Celtic origin while the other four, the equinoxes and solstices, are older and probably date back to Neolithic times. The megalithic culture that built the stone circles in Britain and Europe used these monuments to mark the solar and lunar seasonal alignments. We still observe various folk customs associated with the equinoxes and solstices – the dates when day and night are equal and the shortest and longest days – which originated with pagan beliefs and rituals.

Spring and summer



March 21st is the vernal or spring equinox (the date is approximate as the equinoxes and solstices move from year to year by a few days). This festival usually coincides with the Easter period in the Christian calendar, set each year by

the ancient calculation that it is the first Sunday

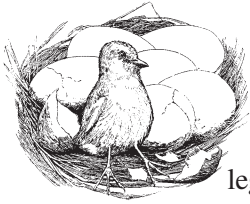
after the first full moon after the spring equinox. The celebration retains many of the pagan elements of the old spring rites. For instance, on Good Friday people eat hot-cross buns, which originated with the small cakes used by the Greeks, Romans and Saxons as sacrificial offerings at the spring festival.

In ancient Rome a small cake with an equal-arm-cross decoration was offered to Diana, the goddess of the moon and hunting.

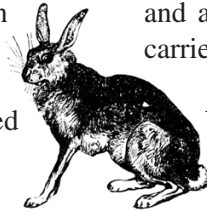
This pagan origin is reflected in the popular belief that preserved pieces of hot-cross bun can be used as a protective charm against fire or for healing purposes.

Easter Eggs also have a pagan source. It was a widespread pre-Christian custom to give painted eggs as a gift for fertility at the spring festival. The egg in ancient times was a well-known symbol of the life principle. In many cultures Creation was believed to have





hatched from the Cosmic Egg laid by either a goose or a mythical or legendary bird. Eggs, especially golden ones laid by a golden goose as in fairy tales, were also symbols of the sun. On Easter morning they were rolled down hillsides in imitation of the solar orb's progressions through the sky. A folk belief also discloses that at sunrise on Easter Sunday the sun can be seen to dance with joy. In folklore hares were supposed to lay eggs to give birth to their young. They were the sacred animal of the moon goddess Eostre, the Saxon deity who gave her name to Easter. This is possibly the origin of the Easter Bunny, really a hare.



Midsummer or the summer solstice (approximately June 21st), the longest day of the year, was celebrated in the West Country and Scotland with the burning of fires on the hills. People leaped through the flames "for luck," and cattle were driven through the burning embers to protect them from disease. The ashes were scattered on the fields to increase the fertility of the crops and bring a good harvest. The farm workers also carried blazing torches lit from the Midsummer fires around the fields for the same purpose. This reflects an ancient magical and pagan belief in the fertilizing power of fire as symbolically representing the sun's rays. In some parts of Britain a blazing "sun wheel," made from a wooden cartwheel tied with straw, was set alight and rolled down a hillside to imitate the sun.

Midsummer's Eve was a magical time, one of the three "spirit nights" with May Eve and Halloween, when the veil between the worlds was thin. It was a time for divination and gathering magical herbs like St. John's wort to hang above the door to ward off thunderstorms and evil influences. Fern seeds collected on this date were also magically potent. They warded off the unwelcome attentions of the Good Folk or fairies who were abroad at this time, and also had the power to make their carrier invisible.

Autumn and winter

The autumn equinox (approximately September 21st) coincided with the end of the harvest, and the ancient belief in the corn spirit survived in folk customs. The last sheaf was ritually cut and formed into a human-shaped image known variously as the Corn Maiden or Corn Mother, the Kern Baby, the Mare, the Old Wife, the Old Hag or the Old Witch. This was carried in procession back to the farm and placed above the hearth to bring fertility and prosperity to the household. In January, when the early ploughing began, the corn dolly was buried in the first furrow to bring a good harvest in the summer.

The last of the minor seasonal festivals of the Wheel of the Year is, of course, the winter solstice or Yule (approximately December 21st), which coincides with Christmas. Before the early Christian Church adopted it as a suitable date for the birthday of Jesus,





the Romans celebrated it as the Saturnalia. They decorated their houses with evergreens, the Lord of Misrule reigned, masters waited on slaves and anarchy replaced the rule of law. The Scandinavians celebrated Yule (literally “wheel,” referring to the turning of the year) in honor of the god Frey, whose sacred animal was a golden boar. This may be the pagan origin of the medieval custom of a boar’s head as the central feature of the Christmas Day feast. Decorated with the magical herbs of rosemary and bay and with a sacred apple in its mouth, the boar’s head was carried to the table accompanied by minstrels preceded by a dancing fool or jester (the Lord of Misrule).

To encourage the sun to return after the winter solstice, the Yule Log was burned during the Twelve Days from Christmas to Twelfth Night (January 6th). It was always of oak, the sacred solar tree. The log had to be lit from a piece of the previous year’s wood and was not allowed to burn out during the Yuletide season. Mistletoe, the sacred plant of the druids, was also placed prominently in the house. Garlands of holly and ivy represented the male/female polarity, and yew represented everlasting life. Finally, the evergreen Yule Tree was decorated to symbolize the Cosmic World Tree of pagan mythology.

Traditionally, the Twelve Days of Yule is one of the times when the Wild Hunt rides out from the Hollow Hill, gathering in the souls of the dead. This

pagan belief is reflected in the seasonal mumming plays re-enacted by “guizers” dressed up in ragged clothes and bizarre masks. Customs such as the Mari Llwyd (“Grey Mare”) in Wales and the Hoodening Horse and Christmas Bull in England also honor this concept. The Mari Llwyd and Hoodening Horse use a real horse’s skull attached to a pole and carried by a human operator concealed under a white sheet. Accompanied by its attendants, the Horse was taken around the village and farms; any house it visited was blessed with good luck for the coming year.

The winter solstice celebrations end on Twelfth Night, the Christian festival of Epiphany. At this time black-faced performers caper around the orchards. They bless the tree spirits with libations of cider and offerings of apple cake, singing the traditional wassailing songs. The celebrants fire shotguns into the branches to ward off disease and evil influences. This is the climax of the folk celebration of the four minor seasonal festivals, which as we have seen are deeply rooted in the ancient past and the pagan beliefs inherited from our ancestors.

– *The Sacred Ring: The Pagan Origins of British Folk Festivals and Customs*

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