



MAY DAY

In his celebrated book *Le Morte d'Arthur*, first published in 1485 by William Caxton, Sir Arthur Malory describes “how Queen Guenever rode a-Maying with certain knights of the Round Table and clad all in green”.

May is the month of greenery, of that vibrant shade that tells of the rebirth of nature, the return of the spirit of life. I am Maia, mother of Hermes and goddess of natural growth. May is my month.

I am also Flora, the Roman goddess of the may-flower, whose festival, the Floralia, was held between April 28 and May 3 each year to celebrate the seasonal renewal with a heady mix of drinking and flowers.

For the Celts, May the First is Beltane, the festival marking the beginning of summer, when cattle were driven out to the summer pastures. Bonfires were lit and leapt over, to protect the cattle, crops and people, and to encourage fertility.

As in other spring festivals, like the Bulgarian Gergiovdan, doors and windows would be decorated with flowers, and holy wells would be visited, with Beltane dew thought to bestow beauty and maintain youthfulness. The same is said to be true of May Day dew in England.

Some Irish folk would make a May Bush: a thorn bush decorated with flowers, ribbons and bright shells. Food and drink from the feasting would be left out for the fairy folk.

Following its usual approach, the Roman Catholic Church has done its best to recuperate the energy of May and in eighteenth-century Naples it began dedicating the month to the Virgin Mary. From there, encouraged mainly by the Jesuits, this association spread all across the Catholic world, including Ireland.

The Church has even tried to take over the magic of the hawthorn, the tree given the name May and closely associated with its festivities. The white blossom is said by Catholics in Ireland to be a symbol of the Virgin Mary, and of chastity, and hawthorn is said to be the material of which Jesus's crown of thorns was fashioned.

But in England, May Day, or Garland Day, is the only big pagan feast day that remains totally untainted by Christianity and is still inspired by the scent of sexuality released into the fresh spring air by the hawthorn. This is the *arbor cupidatis*, the tree of desire, and its boughs were collected during the night of April 30 – May Eve, also known as Roodmas in Britain and Walpurgisnacht in Germany – when young men and women went off to the woods to sing and make love.

They would return on May morning with the maypole, around which they danced in the presence of the May King and Queen. All day long, they played merry May Day Games, celebrating the very fact that they were alive.

Unsurprisingly then, May Day has always been loathed by those Christians who are seemingly motivated by a psychotic hatred for all that is living, organic, of the earth and of the flesh. In his 1583 pamphlet *The Anatomie of Abuses*, the Puritan Philip Stubbes wrote of the English May Day tradition:

Their chiefest jewel they bring from thence is the Maie-poale, which they bring home with great veneration, as thus: twentie, or fourtie yoake of Oxen, euery Oxe hauing a sweete Nosegaie of flowers tyed on the tip of his hornes, and these Oxen drawe home this Maie-poale (this stinking Idoll rather) which is covered all over with Flowers and Hearbes, bound round about with strings from the top to the bottome, and sometimes painted with variable collours, with two or three hundred men, women and children following it, with great devotion.

One person's stinking Idoll is another's Tree of Life.



All across England on the First of May, or on the first weekend of May, a character sometimes described as “a walking, talking bush” sets off to lead a procession through the streets.

It is Jack in the Green – the English version of the Slavic Jura Zeleni or of the Pfingstl, the leafy character who still parades through villages in Bavaria, Germany.

In England, as elsewhere, I am a vegetation-clad symbol of natural rebirth. The mysterious green head from the local church has come to life and leads the local people back into a pre-Christian world – or forward into a post-Christian one!

In Rochester, Kent, I am awoken at dawn on May 1 on Bluebell Hill and taken through the streets as part of the three-day Sweeps Festival, attended by hundreds of “sides” or groups of Morris dancers, the revived folk music tradition that is always at the centre of my celebrations in England.

In Bristol I am nine feet tall, covered in greenery and flowers, and accompanied by attendants, who are also completely disguised in green rags and vegetation. The attendants play music, dance and sing as they guide me through the streets on a six-hour procession from the Harbourside to Horfield Common, where I am slain and ripped apart by onlookers to “release the Spirit of Summer”.

In Hastings, East Sussex, I am at the centre of a big four-day Jack in the Green Festival involving a wild costumed parade through the streets of the old seaside town, featuring leafy “Bogies” or Green Men, and again culminating in my annual sacrificial death.

In Whitstable, Kent, I was joined a few years ago in my annual May Day madness by the musician Suggs, who later travelled to Tuscany and heard the very same folk melody being performed. With his friend Jools Holland, he turned it into a ska song in my honour, *Jack O’ The Green*.

In Guildford and Deptford I go out, in Oxford, Hammersmith, Bovey Tracey, Ilfracombe, Knutsford, Brentham and the City of London.

All over the country, I am followed in my parade by a host of strange characters, such as the Lord and Lady, the Fool, men dressed as women, blind fiddlers, dragons, hobby horses, fairies on stilts, Black Sal, Dusty Bob, May Day Moll, Grand Serag, Jim Crow and Master Merryman.

The May King and Queen are part of my tradition, of course, along with Robin Hood and Maid Marian and, you may not be entirely surprised to hear, St George.

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*You must wake and call me early, call me early, mother dear;
To-morrow’ll be the happiest time of all the glad New-year;
Of all the glad New-year, the maddest, merriest day;
For I’m to be the Queen o’ the May, mother, I’m to be Queen o’ the May.
I sleep so sound all night, mother, that I shall never a-wake,
If you do not call me loud when the day begins to break:*

*But I must gather knots of flowers, and buds and garlands gay,
For I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother, I'm to be Queen o' the May.**

“Through the ages it has been many a young girl’s dream to be chosen as queen of the May and crowned with a garland of flowers at the Maypole”,** writes a chronicler of the May Day celebrations in Knutsford, Cheshire, which is well known for its enthusiastic embrace of the tradition.

Early in the morning the streets are covered with brown and white sand in preparation for the mile-long procession from the Town Hall, at the tail of which comes the yet-uncrowned Queen.

After the crowning on the Heath, there are May Day games, Morris dancing and other festivities, all performed in front of the May Queen’s throne. Like all good May Queens, she is dressed in white, the colour of the flowers of the may-tree.

The central role played by the May Queen is significant. May Day remains Maia’s Day and the annual rebirth of Jack, of vital energy, is from the womb of the Great Mother Earth without whom there could be no life for us to celebrate.

For one brief and heady moment in their young lives, the white-clad maidens become May Queene Isis, *the naturall mother of all things*.

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“Mayday has been a celebration of life, renewal and pleasure since ancient times,” declared the anarchist website ourmayday.org.uk at the start of the twenty-first century. “More recently it was declared International Workers’ Day to commemorate the execution of four anarchists in Chicago for their part in the struggle for an eight-hour working day. Both these aspects of Mayday were intertwined – a festival against work, want and denial and a vision of freedom and plenty throughout the world”.

I have perhaps already tested your patience by explaining how I can be male, female or both; how I can be historically real, mythological or both; how I can be present in one particular cultural icon and yet also absent; how I can be anything from a sacred tree to a human work of art; how I can be not just the human belonging to nature, but the human consciousness of that belonging.

Now I have to tell you that I can also be a day!

Nowhere else, perhaps, do I express so clearly the perfect coherence in my step from celebration to contestation.

As May Day I focus the vitality, and the awareness of vitality, that must reassert itself with ever greater determination against The Thing which stifles it.

I cannot be seen in the dull crowds that trudge along in the sterile political masquerades that sometimes borrow my date.

I am only myself, only the *real* May Day, when something living, something free, something ancient and renewed, bursts out of the greyness of the workaday calendar and takes to the festive streets with colourful shrieks of rage and joy.

I was there in Vienne, Isère, France, on May 1, 1890, when people revolted in response to calls from anarchists Louise Michel, Eugène Thennevin and Pierre Martin. The rebels urged those still at work to drop tools. Their procession of flags, both red and black, clashed with police. Barricades went up, a textile factory was wrecked and spontaneous wildcat strikes lasted all week.

I was there in Paris, on May 1, 1968, when the communists tried and failed to keep the anarchist black flags out of the workers' parade and I was there again on May 1, 1990, when Stalingrad metro station in Paris was renamed "Commune de Kronstadt" by the wit of freedom-loving radicals.

I was in Cleveland, Ohio, for the May Day riots in 1894 and 1919; I was in Washington, DC for the May Day protests against the Vietnam War in 1971; I fought the police at the MacArthur Park rallies in Los Angeles in 2007 and again in Seattle in 2016.

I often come to life in Berlin, Milan, Istanbul and Athens.

And those who know me well understand that I will never lose the essence of my Beltane identity, even if desperate circumstances have forced me to extend into new May Day forms.

In Minneapolis, USA, 50,000 people flock every year to a May Day celebration that combines a parade inspired by political satire with a ceremony in Powderhorn Park where, to the steady beating of drums, a flotilla paddles the Sun across a lake to the shore where the Tree of Life sleeps, waiting to be reawakened.

There are times when my original May Day celebrations are themselves regarded as subversive. The Puritan authoritarians who hijacked the seventeenth-century English Revolution tried to wipe out all forms of "heathen" practice, including May Day and that "stinking Idoll", the maypole. The permanent maypoles that used to grace towns and villages across England and Wales were physically destroyed by Oliver Cromwell's Christian Soldiers.

And the intermingling of my two May Day aspects can still prove confusing for the authorities, not least when among the traditional parade characters are those dangerous hard-left outlaws, Robin Hood and Maid Marian. On April 30, 1981, the organisers of the annual Jack in the Green parade in Brentham Garden Suburb, London, received a surprise letter from the Metropolitan Police, instructing them to observe a 28-day ban on marches in London. It seems that the term "May Day procession" had rung alarm

bells at Scotland Yard and only after a High Court hearing, where the judge concluded that the children in the parade “did not look like a very subversive lot”, were the following day’s festivities able to go ahead.

At other times my enemies are not so much confused by my two sides, as outraged. There was massive media hysteria in 2000 when the statue of Winston Churchill in London’s Parliament Square was decorated with a strip of turf from the adjacent lawn being cultivated by May Day guerrilla gardeners, transforming him for a few magical hours into a punk Green Man.



* Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The May Queen*

** virtual-knutford.co.uk

www.winteroak.org.uk