

Beltane

Beltane, otherwise known as Bealtaine. is an ancient and traditional Gaelic festival which is celebrated on or around 1 May, also known as May Day. This holiday was celebrated in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man and has seen a degree of revival in recent years.

The lighting of bonfires on the eve of Beltane, on mountains and hills of ritual and political significance was one of the main activities of this festival. This term Lá(th) Buidhe Bealtaine is also used in Irish and is translated as "Bright May Day". In Ireland it is referred to in a common folk tale as Luan Lae Bealtaine the first day of the week Monday / Luan is added to emphasise the first day of summer. Hooray, at last!

In ancient Ireland the main Bealtaine fire was held on the central hill of Uisneach, 'the navel of Ireland', the ritual centre of the country, which is located in what is now known as County Westmeath. In Ireland the lighting of bonfires on Bhealtaine seems only to have survived to the present day in County Limerick, as their annual bonfire night.

Another Beltane tradition which survived up until the early 20th century in Ireland was the hanging of May Boughs on the doors and windows of houses and of the erecting of May Bushes in farmyards, which usually consisted either of a branch of rowan or more commonly whitethorn (hawthorn) which is in bloom at the time and is commonly called the "May Bush". Furze (Celtic for Gorse) was also used for the May Boughs, May Bushes and was also used as a fuel for the fire. Gorse symbolised positive energy. The May Bush was decorated with flowers, ribbons, garlands and coloured egg shells similar to the ones we decorate at Easter time.

Beltane is a cross-quarter day, marking the midpoint in the Sun's progress between the vernal equinox and summer solstice. Since the Celtic year was based on both lunar and solar cycles, it is possible that the holiday was celebrated on the full moon nearest the midpoint between the vernal equinox and the summer solstice. In astronomy the date for this midpoint is somewhere May 5 and May 7 making Beltane a few days later than we actually celebrate, but this varies from year to year.

In Irish mythology, the beginning of the summer season for the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Milesians started at "Bealtaine". Huge bonfires would mark a time of purification and transition, heralding in the season in the hope of a good harvest later in the year, and were accompanied with ritual acts to protect the people from any harm from negative energies. Like the festival of Samhain (Hallowe'en), opposite Beltane on the Pagan Calendar, Beltane was also a time when we humans are much closer to the spirit world.

Early Gaelic sources from around the 10th century state that the druids of the community would create a what was called a "need-fire" on top of a hill on Beltane and drive the village's cattle through the fires to purify them and bring luck. In Scotland, boughs of juniper were sometimes thrown on the fires to

add an additional element of purification and blessing to the smoke. People would also pass between two fires in order to purify themselves. This was echoed throughout history after Christianization, with ordinary (lay) people instead of Druid priests creating the need-fire. This practice continued up until the 1950s, and in some places (including Calton Hill in Edinburgh) the celebration of Beltane continues today, although Edinburgh's Beltane Fire is not recognised as a religious festival by practising pagans. However, it is still quite an experience!

The evening begins with a procession to the top of Calton Hill, complete with a May Queen and a Green Man (ancient God and Goddess figures representing fertility and growth).

The May Queen crowns the Green Man, in a ritual similar to that carried out by Wiccan Pagans (who follow a much more structured set of rituals). Winter officially ends when the Green Man's winter costume is taken from him and he is revealed in his spring costume. A wild dance takes place and the Green Man and the May Queen are married.

The main element of this and any Beltane celebration is fire. On Calton Hill torchbearers (often painted red!) carry purifying flames and fire arches are used to represent the gateways between the earthly world and the spirit world. It is quite a powerful ceremony, but is now a ticketed event as it has become a bit rowdy in recent years.

Most of the imagery used for these rituals and costumery comes from the Scottish and Celtic folklore. Other influences come from indigenous people world wide. For instance, the symbol of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, can be seen on the faces of some of the performers, and the Geisha traditions of Japan are clearly seen in the dress of the White Women (assistants of the May Queen). This gives an eclectic feel to this celebration which some feel is not entirely conventional. This could also be why it is not recognised by pagans.

So Beltane, as we see is a Gaelic and Celtic celebration. Other Celtic cultures, such as the Welsh, Bretons, and Cornish, do not celebrate Beltane in this way. However, they do celebrate festivals similar to it at the same time of year. In Wales, the day is known as Calan Mai, and the Gaulish name for the Beltane is Belotenia.

Happy Beltaine, May Day or whatever you like to call it. Summer is on the way!