



The Wheel of the Year THROUGH THE DARK TIME

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Into the Dark

The start of the natural cycle of the year for the Celtic people was at the start of November and this was a time of looking both forward and back, contemplating what has been gained and lost in the past year and of what might be done next year. It is also a time of planting seeds and ideas that can germinate in the dark days of winter. This is still called Hop-tu-naa in the Isle of Man, the same root name as the Hogmanay we associate with Jan 1st today.

As the leaves are stripped from the trees and the days turn short and dark there seems to be a need for firelight, shared meals, reflection and story-telling. We still have outdoor get-togethers in November now celebrated as Bonfire night*. This energy gives way to the calmer thanksgiving feast of Martinmas, and Armistice Day remembering the sacrifices of those who 'gave their lives that we may live', something which resonates with the ancient theme of life from death.

For much of this time from mid November to mid January three quarters of each 'day' is night, especially in the north. In a pre-industrial society with no electricity it was a time to sit around a fire for warmth and light, sharing the harvest and eating the food that would not keep long; filling the long evenings with stories and songs; drinking ale and trying not to fall out with each other while crowded indoors as the food got less and less interesting and the nights colder and colder.

The long Norse Yuletide started in mid November and continued until mid January when the light started to noticeably return. In these Isles we have many mid-winter traditions as each culture marked the winter as a key turning point in the year.

* which rather unpleasantly celebrates the torture and death of the catholic political dissenters rather than the older cleansing healing fires of Celtic culture on 31st October/1st November.

Midwinter and Yule

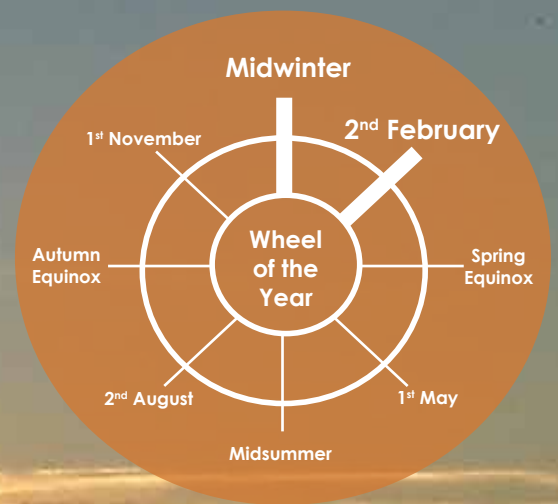
Our oldest stone circles and pre Celtic monuments from the Hebrides to Wiltshire seem to be built in relation to the mid winter sun; although what significance, if any, this has beyond the ability to mark the turning of the year is unclear. It is easy to see why, as the Wheel of the Year revolves beyond death and towards new light and new life, most cultures celebrated with myths of the re-birth of a sun or vegetation god. In the case of the Celts this was the re-birth of the Mabon, the divine child, but also of the Oak King, something that translated well into the celebration of the birth of a Christian saviour.

The twelve days of Christmas incorporates both the Norse Yuletide and the Celtic belief that the sun stood still for twelve days in the middle of winter, which it does seem to do before the days get noticeably lighter.

The role of evergreen trees figures much in our midwinter tradition and comes from both Norse and Celtic cultures. The classic Christmas tree was introduced by Prince Albert; however it probably re-kindled a memory of an older tree decorating habit. From the Celts we seem to have kept the importance of bringing evergreens into the house, but have forgotten that we do this to keep the fairy folk safe through the winter. We bring in Holly, Ivy and Mistletoe, each of which had its own superstition.

For the Celts the red berried Holly was King of Winter (the counterbalance to Oak the King of Summer) and Holly wreaths may have once been crowns although wreathes were also a Roman tradition. You will know if you go Holly hunting that many Holly trees do not have berries; the Holly has both male and female forms and it is, of course, the latter that bears the berries so the king of winter was actually a queen which would equate with later stories of the Queen of Winter.

We still know that Mistletoe relates to kissing but perhaps this is becoming rarer today. In Celtic culture the world was created by the red and the white dragon that fought endlessly, each trying to eat their own/each other's tail and so had no beginning and no end. The themes of white and red berries, of upright and twined plants and of eternal evergreen have all been seen as metaphors for male, female, light, dark, life, death, creation and rebirth.



Wheel of the Year Activities

- ✓ Rummage deep in the leaf litter under some oak trees and look for the acorns germinating – the Oak King reborn.
- ✓ Weave wreaths from renewable resources like willow or honeysuckle then decorate with evergreens and berries to make the Holly King's crown. After the celebrations put this out for the birds.
- ✓ Compare the impact of a tree grown and harvested for Christmas compared to pruning small amounts from Ivy, Holly and other evergreens.
- ✓ Try a Holly hunt to see which trees in your area produce berries – these female trees are the kings!
- ✓ Discover how Mistletoe grows and see if you can germinate any seeds (for those south of the M62 – I do not know of any growing further north)
- ✓ As the daylight increases find some snowdrops, see how many different types you find, they can look like fairies dresses from the underneath. Visit some lambs. Collect some winter twigs and grasses and weave St Bridget's crosses.
- ✓ Light a winter campfire (indoor or out) create songs or stories perhaps simply from adjectives used to describe a winter tree, a snowdrop or a newborn lamb.
- ✓ Be thankful that winter is passing and that you have warmth and food to survive it. ■

The Yule Log for the Norse was a huge log of ash (as in the world tree), lit from a piece of last year's log that would burn for all the days of the feast. The Celts would bring in a ceremonial log decorated in evergreens which was lit to conquer the darkness, banish evil spirits and bring luck for the coming year. Our traditions of carol signing and mumming, going from place to place are Celtic, but from the Norse comes the Wassailing and singing to the apple trees. From the Norse we get some darker beliefs – those of old father time, who was Odin the long bearded All-Father who saw all and the idea of the wild hunt and of sacrifice of the old for the new.

Our jolly red gift-giving Santa most people know is an American Coca-cola reinvention based on St Nicholas who gave gifts in early December. However that glass of sherry or mince pie you leave are more akin to the Norse tradition of having to bribe 'old father time' (or Odin in disguise) with food and drink as he came visiting door to door. And the reindeer which appeared in the Victorian era are a half-remembered idea of the wild hunt of the Celtic horned wild nature god, whose head was adorned with proud deer antlers (not the later medieval Christian goat devil God) and who lead the winter hunt through the skies. The tiny elves, now Santa's helpers were once the Norse Nisse, friendly if sometimes awkward house spirits who gave gifts and helped around the farm for payment of a bowl of porridge.

New Light, New Hope

Perhaps the Celtic festival we most miss is that of the almost forgotten *Imbolc*, which translates as Ewes-Milk. Later known as St Brigit's day or Candlemas, it comes at the start of February when there is the first lifting of the grip of winter. It comes at a time when spirits are lowest after 12 weeks of darkness. Suddenly one morning dawns clear with a brief smell of spring in the air, it is just enough to give us hope before the weather returns to winters grip until the true spring arrives. Into this time come the snowdrops and the first lambs. This is also the time the Irish have the festival of St Bridget, previously the festival of the goddess of fire, poetry and creativity on the 2nd February.

If ever there was a time when we need an optimistic festival to lift our spirits in these northern islands it is the end of January, and perhaps this is one that Outdoor Learning can help re-introduce as we rebuild our connections with the nature's rhythms.