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The Folklore of Spring in Ireland: A Dichotomy of Traditions

The Irish traditional year was divided into four quarters, each one beginning with a specific festival, i.e. *Samain* at the beginning of November, *Imbolc* at the beginning of February, *Bealtaine* in the first days of May and *Lughnasa*, three months later, at the beginning of August. These four popular festivals punctuate – or rather, up to the first half of the twentieth century, punctuated – the Irish year, especially in the most rural parts of the island. It has been shown that these four celebrations are, at least partially, the modern folkloric version of ancient festivals which were most likely Celtic by nature.¹ To that extent the case of the festival of *Bealtaine* seems particularly interesting: the celebration of *Bealtaine* was associated with countless superstitions, beliefs, traditions and pilgrimages. However, a true dichotomy, a clear difference, can be found between the traditions held in rural Ireland on the one hand and larger towns or cities on the other. Does this dichotomy mirror an original and fundamental difference between the rural version of *Bealtaine* and its urban counterpart? Are the rural and urban versions of the festival two sides of a single coin or, on the contrary, is the problem substantially more complex regarding the symbolism and origins of those traditions?

1 See Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* (Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1962).

Samain, Imbolc and Lughnasa

As Máire MacNeill noted in her seminal work *The Festival of Lughnasa*, the Irish year used to be – and to a certain extent remains – divided into four quarters arguably corresponding to four distinct seasons:

It is one of the great facts of the Celtic past and the strength with which it was rooted in consciousness and has survived to this day is remarkable. The four feasts were identified (when and how we cannot tell) with November first, February first, May first, and August first of the Julian calendar.²

The festivals of *Samain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa*³ respectively marked the beginning of those four quarters and therefore took the name of ‘quarter-days’. The two major festivals, *Samain* and *Bealtaine*, bore the name of ‘half-year days’ as they divided the year into two main seasons. According to tradition, winter began at *Samain* and ended at *Bealtaine*;⁴ conversely, summer began at *Bealtaine* and would end six months later at *Samain*, in the first days of November.⁵

It is widely accepted that *Samain* was the most important festival of all, on a symbolic level as well as regarding its popularity among people.

2 MacNeill, 1.

3 The spelling of those terms is not constant and variants do exist (*Samhain* / *Beltaine* / *Lughnasad* etc.).

4 A popular saying refers to something which tends to drag out as lasting ‘Ó Samhain go Bealtaine’, that is to say from *Samain* to *Bealtaine*. *Irish Folklore Commission 1942*, MS. 1095 (Co. Kerry and Tipperary).

5 Although tradition generally holds that the four Irish festivals corresponds to the first day of November, February, May and August, the date of celebrations could vary for several reasons: first it must be remembered that the festivals were at least partially inspired by Celtic traditions (which means that the calendar used was luni-solar); second, the adaptation from the Gregorian to the Julian Calendar later led to disparities; finally, the Christianization of some of the traditions sometimes brought people to hold the festival on the Sunday following the ‘official’ traditional date. See Frédéric Armao, ‘La Charnière de Mai: *Beltaine*, fête celtique ou fête irlandaise ?’, *Ollodagos* 28 (2013), 61–128.

The celebration not only marked the beginning of the winter season: it was the first celebration of the year and consequently bears many of the characteristics of a New Year festival. Just like the other three celebrations, *Samain* regulated the activities of the farmer. Cattle, horse and hiring fairs were organized throughout the country in the first days of November; at *Samain*, transhumance ended and all crops were supposed to have been harvested:⁶ failing to do so meant bad luck for the rest of the year.⁷ Interestingly enough the November festival⁸ was thought to be a period where the gates between the world of the living and the ‘Otherworld’ opened. The people of this ‘Otherworld’, i.e. the fairies, were supposed to cross the boundaries between the two worlds and become visible to the common man. According to popular belief, those fairies could abduct little children – less frequently grown-ups – play pranks and do mischiefs or, in the worst cases, kill people who wandered alone on *Samain* night. Witches were also feared as they were thought to gather and prepare evil spells that they would cast on people or cattle. For these reasons, a number of superstitions, most of them being connected with fire, were carried out by farmers and rural workers around the time of *Samain*.⁹

The festival of *Imbolc*, celebrated three months later in the first days of February, is much less documented and in many respects quite difficult to fully understand. It may be remembered that the feast is sometimes referred to as Saint Brigit’s Day: the connection with the Christian saint, and/or a Christianized Celtic counterpart of the saint, is accepted by most researchers.¹⁰ Just like the other Irish festivals, many superstitions and

6 All those examples are directly taken from the work of the *Irish Folklore Commission 1942*, MS. 1095, 1096 and 1097.

7 See also Françoise Leroux, and Christian Guyonvarc’h, *Les Fêtes Celtiques* (Rennes: Editions Ouest-France, 1995), chap. 1.

8 Originally, the festivals were not connected with the Gregorian/Julian calendar and were most likely held around the midpoint between equinoxes and solstices. See Donatien Laurent, & Michel Tréguer, *la Nuit celtique* (Rennes: Terres de Brume, 1997).

9 See for instance Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2002, 1911), 332–357.

10 Seamas O’ Cathain, *The Festival of Brigit* (Blackrock: D.B.A. Publications, 1995).

customs linked to farming and the agricultural world – especially the lactation of ewes – existed up to the early second half of the twentieth century. *Imbolc* in itself divided in half the six-month winter starting at *Samhain* and ending at *Bealtaine*: in other words, it corresponded to the beginning of a three-month spring ending at *Bealtaine*.¹¹

Just like *Imbolc* divided winter in half, the festival of *Lughnasa*, held at the beginning of August, used to divide summer in two equal parts: from May to August (from the festival of *Bealtaine* to *Lughnasa*), summer was at its peak and from August to November (from *Lughnasa* to *Samain*), it was declining: it therefore could be said that the Irish traditional season of autumn started with *Lughnasa* in early August – and this view was actually shared by many if not all farmers in the rural areas of Ireland. This festival is exceptionally well documented as Máire MacNeill thoroughly studied both its folklore and mythology. The purpose of this introductory part is merely to remind the reader of the importance of the four Irish feasts; consequently, it will only be mentioned here that *Lughnasa* marked the beginning of harvest and that the celebration was associated in Ireland with an exceptionally large number of rural traditions and superstitions, fairs, festive assemblies and pilgrimages.¹²

The first days of May – be it the first of May, the first Sunday of the month or ‘old *Bealtaine*’, e.g. the eleventh or twelfth¹³ of May – traditionally corresponded to the beginning of the active season of the farmer. It was the time cattle were sent to the pastures: the same cattle would come back for wintering at *Samain*. As a matter of fact the two feasts of *Bealtaine* and *Samain* were intimately associated: a tradition, a superstition, an agricultural work beginning in early May often ended in early November

11 The division of the year in four seasons (and not two) is however probably a later addition. See *infra*.

12 MacNeill.

13 Those two dates corresponded to the adaptation from the Gregorian to the Julian calendar: the adoption of the new Julian calendar created a difference of about eleven/twelve days between the two; some people were reluctant to change the date of their old celebrations, therefore persisting in celebrating *Bealtaine* on the eleventh or twelfth of May of the Gregorian calendar.

and *vice versa*. The example of the transhumance which began at *Bealtaine* and ended at *Samain* is in itself quite telling; many Irish fairs held in early May also found their counterpart in early November; it could be added that *Samain* marked the end of harvesting whereas *Bealtaine* marked the end of the sowing season. Moreover, the first days of May were the only time of the year – along with *Samain* – when the world of the living and the dead were traditionally connected:¹⁴ the apparitions and spells associated with fairies and witches were feared by the rural population at the two festivals. Finally, the six-month winter starting in early November ended in early May; the six-month summer beginning at *Bealtaine* ended at *Samain*. It has been argued that there used to be only two seasons in Ireland and more widely speaking in the Celtic world: a six-month winter and a six-month summer which were later divided into four distinct seasons.¹⁵ To this aspect, as *Bealtaine* represents the passing between winter and summer, the festival should be assimilated to a festival of spring, a transition between the passive/dark season of winter and the active/bright season of summer.¹⁶

14 For a more specific description of the traditions here mentioned, see Frédéric Armao, ‘The Women of *Bealtaine*: from the Maiden to the Witch’, *Cosmos* 25, *Ritual Year* 4 (2009), 71–82 or one of the influential papers published by Patricia Lysaght. For example Patricia Lysaght, ‘Bealtaine: Irish Maytime Customs and the Reaffirmation of Boundaries’, *Boundaries and Thresholds: Papers From a Colloquium of the Katharine Briggs Club* (Stroud: Thimble for the Katharine Briggs Club, 1993).

15 The original division of the year in two parts (a ‘bright’ active one and a ‘dark’ passive one) was clearly demonstrated in relation with ancient Celtic and/or Gaulish calendars. See for instance Paul-Marie Duval et Georges Pinault, *Recueil des Inscriptions gauloises Vol. III: les calendriers (Coligny, Villards d’Héria)* (Paris: Ed. du C.N.R.S., 1986).

16 The reference to an ‘active’ and a ‘passive’ season is not only to be found in connection with the folklore of *Bealtaine* and *Samain*. Françoise LeRoux and Christian Guyonvarc’h noted on several occasions the mythological origin of this conception of the world. The active/passive seasons were relevant not only for farmers but also for warriors and Irish ‘bards’ (*filid*). See for example Christian-Joseph Guyonvarc’h, *Textes Mythologiques irlandais I* (Rennes: Ogam-Celticum, 1980) or Christian-Joseph Guyonvarc’h et Françoise Le Roux, *Les Druides* (Rennes: Ed. Ouest-France, 1986) or more specifically Leroux/Guyonvarc’h, *Les Fêtes Celtiques*, 40–41.

Bealtaine and May Day

The festival that was held in early May could be referred to as *Bealtaine* or *May Day* depending on the native tongue of the speaker.¹⁷ In the *Gaeltachtaí* – the areas where the Irish language is predominant – the term *Bealtaine* is in use and it should be noted that the term ‘lá Bealtaine’ simply means ‘the first day of May’ in modern Irish. The customs linked to the festivals could be divided in three distinct categories, namely a) the customs and superstitions relevant to rural activities, b) the supernatural, and c) the assemblies and gatherings.

Bealtaine not only marked the beginning of a transhumance that was to end on *Samain*, nor was it simply the festival marking the end of winter and the beginning of summer: a number of rural activities started or ended in connection with the feast. The annual sowing was supposed to be ending by then; neutering of cattle took place at that time of the year; May seaweeds ought to be gathered; the mackerel fishing season could start; it was also ‘the usual starting time for turf-cutting in hilly and exposed country districts.’¹⁸ It should be noted that, traditionally, *Bealtaine* stood as ‘the beginning of every bargain and agreement’;¹⁹ more specifically, any debt should be paid by that time and annual rents were supposed to be collected on this day.²⁰ It was also a popular time for hiring, as numerous hiring fairs were held in May: their equivalent was often found in early November in connection with *Samain*, just like many cattle and horse fairs existed in relation with both festivals. A large number of superstitions were also connected to those traditions. For example, leaving for the pastures on *Bealtaine* was not only customary: it was a way to bring good luck on cattle. This luck was even more certain if transhumance was conducted in a specific way. An informant tells us that:

17 See *supra*.

18 MS. 1095 (Co. Kerry).

19 MS. 1095 Co. Cork.

20 See for example *Irish Folklore Commission 1942*, MS. 1097 (Co. Kildare).

In South co. Wicklow it used to be the custom to drive the cows out to the fields on May Morning with a stick cut from a mountain-ash tree. It was said that this would prevent losses of stock for the year.²¹

But what should be remembered is that this specific time of the year was particularly feared in the rural areas of Ireland: the diseases contracted in May were thought to be more dangerous and deadly than others and, more broadly speaking, the month was considered dangerous and crucial regarding one’s health or fortune. Just like in the case of *Samain*, the ‘supernatural’ (mainly witches and fairies) was explicitly dreaded and it is in this context that many of the superstitions of *Bealtaine* were carried out. Borrowing or giving such commodities as milk, butter, metal or fire (in the form of burning ambers or coal for example) was strictly forbidden because it meant that the farmer would give away his luck for the rest of the year to the person receiving it – and this person was very likely to be a witch in disguise. The most popular superstition of *Bealtaine* was to be found, once again, in connection with the preservation of cattle:

Every year, on the night of May Eve, the cows were driven into a field adjoining those in which they were to spend the night. After supper Mr Barron and his men (farm hands) went out, made a gap in the fence through which the cows could pass to their night quarters. This gap was then filled with withered grass and furze which were then set alight. All the men then armed themselves with sticks, rounded up the cows and forced them through the gap of fire into the fields where they were to spend the night. I, myself, took part in this driving of the cattle through the gap of fire on May Eve during my years of service with Mr Barron. The driving of the cattle was a custom there. The reason for this practice: it was believed that such a driving [...] was powerful to prevent those who worked charms from taking the produce of the cows. The practice has long since died.²²

‘Those who worked charms’ were therefore thought to have the power to steal away both luck and fortune on *Bealtaine*. Witches could be seen dragging a piece of cloth in the field of farmers (which symbolically meant that they stole from them) and sometimes took the form of milking hares

21 MS. 1097 (Co. Wicklow).

22 MS. 1095 (Co. Waterford).

that would suck the milk (that is, their wealth and fortune) out of the cows. Just like in early November, fairies were also particularly active on *Bealtaine*: they crossed the boundaries between the world of the living and the Otherworld where they were believed to usually dwell so that they could steal babies and leave 'changelings' instead or simply steal the luck of the farmers for the rest of the year. Of course, there were several ways to counter those evil spells: May flowers were scattered on doorsteps, red cloths were tied on the tails of cattle, May masses were said, holy water was sprinkled, people and beasts passed between fires... The number of 'counterspells' and their variants are almost infinite although it should be noted that they all evolved around the same elements, namely water (and/or dew), metal (especially iron), flowers and greeneries, the colour red and obviously fire.

Those examples, taken among many others, bring into sharp focus the fact that, in the rural areas of Ireland, the festival of *Bealtaine* was a time where fear and hope intertwined: witches, fairies, ill-luck, bad health, loss of fortune and wealth were feared; conversely, people hoped for a plentiful summer, good crops, a healthy stock and good weather for the rest of the year. Similarly, it should be noted that many young girls or even elder women who *feared* that they would die alone, tried and practised so-called 'marriage divination', therefore caressing the *hope* to uncover the name of their potential future husband.²³ Yet it is in the context of the popular assemblies that the concept of hope/fear of May finds its most explicit expression and, at the same time, is confronted to what may look at first as a paradox: indeed, the assemblies of *Bealtaine* could be divided into two distinct categories which seem to be at odds with each other.

The first type of assemblies²⁴ is, once again, only to be found in the rural areas of Ireland. They were closely connected with cattle and,

23 Most of those divination practices involved the use of yarrow mainly in Ulster (see MS. 1096 Co. Tyrone, Fermanagh, Antrim, Donegal for instance) whereas dew and water were favoured in Munster and Leinster (MS. 1095 Co. Clare, Longford, Laois, Cork...).

24 Cattle and hiring fairs are not included in this particular definition of assemblies and gatherings which, in this context, are to be associated with rituals and superstitions.

more broadly speaking, farm life. The best example is accounted for by William Wilde:

It was not unusual, some fifteen or twenty years ago [in the 1830s], to bleed a whole herd of cattle upon May morning, and then to dry and burn the blood. We have more than once, when a boy, seen the entire of the great Fort of *Rathcroghan*, then the centre of one of the most extensive and fertile grazing districts of Connacht, literally reddened with the blood thus drawn upon May morning.²⁵

This tradition is all the more interesting that the Fort of *Rathcroghan* was identified with *Cruachan*, a place of high significance in the Irish mythology which is sometimes considered as a gate to the Otherworld and/or a fairy abode²⁶ – therefore connecting the bleeding of cattle at *Rathcroghan* to both Celtic mythology and the folkloric belief in fairies which was itself so popular in relation to the festival of *Bealtaine*. The custom died out in the nineteenth century and contemporary assemblies are much less extreme: most of the time, holy places and specifically holy wells are visited at *Bealtaine*. For instance, *Tobarín na Súil*, which is translated as 'the little well of the eyes' or 'the little well of hope', is still visited in early May and its water is supposed to cure eye ailments if drunk and applied after turning around the well clockwise.²⁷ The most popular site to date remains *Cathair Crobh Dearg*, also called *the City*, Co. Cork.²⁸ The site consists in a large circular stone wall in which a couple of cairns and monoliths are to be found and where a statue of the Virgin Mary was set up in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁹ A holy well is situated by the west side of the wall. Its water is drunk and sometimes taken home. It is supposed to cure various ailments and to protect both people and cattle

25 William R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852) (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1995), 32.

26 John Waddell, *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2000), 347–348.

27 MS. 1095 (Co. Cork).

28 Dan Cronin, *In the Shadow of the Paps* (Killarney: Crede, Sliabh Luachra Heritage Group, 2001).

29 For a more accurate description see Cronin.

for the rest of the year if drunk or taken home precisely at *Bealtaine*. The cattle used to be brought within the site and spent the first night of May there so that it could benefit from its protection for the rest of the year. May masses used to be celebrated – the Christianization of pagan rites should not be surprising – and people still say prayers within the enclosure and/or walk around the stone wall reciting the rosary. The idea is once again to cure and protect for the remainder of the year: the notions of fear and hope (fear of ailments and diseases; hope for a plentiful healthy year) consequently apply.

The second type of Irish popular assemblies in early May differs significantly from that idea: many May Pole celebrations were to be found in Ireland up to the twentieth century.

The crowds would gather each evening and dance till 12 o'clock or later. There would be plenty of music, mostly flutes. The musicians were not paid, they were delighted to get playing and a good belly-ful of a feed. Plenty of boxty was got, [lots of milk and] duck-eggs and butter. They would have a fire nearby to cook the eggs. (...) The party would finish up with the 'brandy dance' a sort of chain dance, like the 16-hand-reel and it was danced around the pole, each boy and girl in turn kissed the pole and said some remark on finishing up the turn. That ended the week's May Pole dance.³⁰

A May Pole was a large pole adorned with flowers, ribbons and miscellaneous bushes at its top which was set up in various places, most of the time in the main square of towns and cities, and people would dance and celebrate around it. Most of those May Pole celebrations were held in the urban centres of Ireland, more specifically in the north and east of the island.³¹ Far from the notions of fear and hope, the idea was here to enjoy

30 MS. 1096 (Co. Leitrim).

31 See for example Wilde, 38: 'The only authorized pole now standing which we know of is at Holywood, near Belfast, where it used to bear the orange-and-blue flags and streamers on the 12th of July, equally with the flower-decked hoops and green garlands of the first of May. When we last saw it, it was decorated with miniature ships, emblematic of the calling of the villagers.' The following quotation is also interesting: 'From our records I find the first May Pole was erected in Holywood on a May Eve about 160 years ago when a party of Dutch seamen arrived in the town,

oneself while dancing, playing music, feasting and drinking. According to some informants, those celebrations were made to 'welcome the summer' in a joyful way. The same could be said about other popular events such as May Bush celebrations which involved the carrying in procession of a large bush adorned with colourful flowers, ribbons, occasionally eggshells etc.³² May Queens and May Babies were often elected and carried in procession as well and some May Games used to be organized in urban centres on *May Day*:

The scene opened with a dance, on a large scale, to the music of several pipers and fiddlers. Foot races by men, for hats, from the platform to Caherane, followed [...]. Bags or sacks were fastened round the necks of the competitors, and in that way they were to proceed [...]. The tobacco and snuff were dealt out to the best grinners, male and female. The amusement was kept during the day with great order [...]. On all other May-days the townspeople repaired to Ballyseedy to amuse themselves by dancing and drinking, a custom which is still partially kept up.³³

The difference between the *Bealtaine* gatherings and the *May Day* celebrations is striking. While *Bealtaine* customs were all linked with the very notion of transition (from winter to summer, from the passive season to the active one) which implied a fear of the forthcoming six months and a comprehensible hope that things would go well, the traditions connected with the first days of May in the urban centres of Ireland were quite dissimilar; enjoyment, pleasure and the welcoming of summer were at the core of those celebrations which should therefore not be mistaken with *Bealtaine* customs: they were *May Day* traditions.

put up a small pole festooned with flowers and made merry. Local residents joined in the revels and the celebration was an annual affair up till 1843 when the pole was blown down by the storms. There were three May Poles altogether and I am told a new one will be provided when timber is available'. MS. 1096 (Co. Down).

32 This form of May bush procession should not be confused with the small bough that sometimes used to be planted in a heap of manure at *Bealtaine* by farmers to bring good luck on the farm and that was occasionally (and mistakenly) called a 'May bush' or a 'May pole' by English speakers.

33 *The Kerry Magazine*, XXV, Vol. III: January 1856, 11–12.

Dichotomy of traditions, dichotomy of origins

The term *May Day* in itself was obviously used by speakers whose native tongue was English while the term *Bealtaine* was favoured by Irish speakers while dealing with celebrations that took place in the first days of the month. However, the distinction between the two was not that clear as English speakers occasionally referred to 'Bealtaine' when talking (or writing) in English and some Irish speakers who thought that 'May Day' was a correct translation of *Bealtaine* therefore used the term while describing a custom which was obviously linked with the Irish festival of *Bealtaine*.³⁴ Still, whereas the rural celebration of *Bealtaine* was based on fear and hope (see the aforementioned examples of cattle purification, pilgrimages, fear of witches and fairies, fear of diseases, death, stealing, loneliness...), that of *May Day* focused mainly on joy and pleasure. The distinction is therefore not only a semantic one nor is it simply confined to the field of translation: *Bealtaine* and *May Day* in Ireland were two separate festivals whose purpose was, if not antagonistic, at least complementary and whose origin was most likely dissimilar.

In order to answer the question of the origins of this – or rather those – festival(s), it is necessary to turn to comparative analysis: is it possible to find a counterpart of *Bealtaine* and/or *May Day* in other cultures and territories?

In the Isle of Man, a territory whose history of invasions seems quite comparable to that of Ireland in many respects, a festival called *Laa-Boaldyn* used to be celebrated. This festival has many features which remind us of the Irish celebration of *Bealtaine*: cattle was led to pastures and symbolically purified on that date, fairs were held and deals were made, superstitions linked with marriage divinations, weather, health, fear of diseases or witches and fairies were widespread; some holy wells were visited and the themes of prophylactic fire or water were known. On the other hand, the customs of May Poles/Queens/Babies as they are described in relation to Irish urban

34 See the manuscripts of the *Irish Folklore Commission 1942* or the *Schools' Collection Manuscripts* for example. Many researchers still consider that Irish *May Day* and *Bealtaine* celebrations are part of a single set of traditions.

centres were absent of the Island of Man.³⁵ The same observation can be made when dealing with the Scottish celebration of *Beltane*: the Scottish *Beltane* seems comparable in many respects to the Irish *Bealtaine* with obviously its own specificities which, it must be noted, do not contradict the essence of the celebration, i.e. purification and prophylaxis:

On the first of May the herdsmen of every village hold their Bealtaine, a rural sacrifice. They cut a square trench on the ground, leaving the turf in the middle; on that they dress a large cauldle of eggs, butter, oat-meal, and milk, and bring, besides the ingredients of the cauldle, plenty of beer and whisky; for each of the company must contribute something. The rites begin with spilling some of the cauldle on the ground by way of libation; on that, everyone takes a cake of oatmeal, upon which are raised nine squared knobs, each dedicated to some particular being, the supposed preserver of their flocks and herds, or to some particular animal, the real destroyer of them; each person then turns his face to the fire, breaks off a knob, and flinging it over his shoulders, says, 'This I give to thee, preserve thou my horses; this to thee, preserve my sheep'; and so on.³⁶

Once again, the May Poles/Bushes/Queens/Babies rituals in Scotland were seldom if ever popular. The exact opposite can be said about early May celebrations in England: although the festival of *Bealtaine* was not celebrated for obvious reasons, the *May Day* festivities almost exclusively dealt with the joyful welcoming of summer around a May Pole or a May Bush and the idea of going 'a-maying', that is celebrating the beginning of May in a merry way, was common in the towns and cities of England. As the song goes:

It's always on the first of May / We meet and dress so gaily; / It's always on the very day / We trim the garlands gaily. / Ladies, gents, now fill the box / Until it does run over; / For to-day we'll merry be, / And to-morrow we'll give over. / Hail! All hail! / The merry month of May! / We'll hasten to the woods away / Among the flowers so sweet and gay.

35 The tradition of May Queens seems to have been somewhat popular but the custom was significantly different: mock fights were organized between the Queen of Winter and the Queen of Summer. See A.W. Moore, *The Folklore of the Isle of Man* (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1891) and John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901).

36 James M. MacKinlay, *Folklore of Scottish Lochs and Springs* (Glasgow: William Hodge & Co., 1893), 285–286.

*/ Away! Away! / The merry month of May! / [...] Parents, labour away. / The sun is up, the morn is bright, / The first of May is our delight. / Shake the box and bells, / And call on every lady; / Mind and give a good look out, / For we are dressed so gaily.*³⁷

It is clearly impossible to list all the customs of all European May traditions in a couple of paragraphs. It must be reminded however that comparable traditions used to exist throughout Europe: *Valborgsmässoafton* in Sweden bears much resemblance with *May Day*, as it was a festival of rejoicing and welcoming of the summer around a May Pole;³⁸ on the other hand, witches and milk-stealing were dreaded just like in the case of the Germanic *Walpurgisnacht*.³⁹ But it is in Central Europe that the most striking similarities are to be found in connection with the Irish festival of *Bealtaine*: the celebration of Saint George's Day in Bulgaria, Romania or even Hungary for example has exactly the same symbolic and ritual values as its Irish counterpart (i.e. purification/prophylaxis of both people and animals based on the fear of the coming of the new season; limited impact of traditions of joy and merriment such as May Pole customs).⁴⁰

The rituals linked with the month of May in Ireland are twofold: even though the terms *Bealtaine* and *May Day* were interchangeable for most folkloric informants and commentators, it seems clear that two festivals used to be observed in Ireland and that they are distinct celebrations. The rural *Bealtaine* celebrated the turning point between a six-month winter and a six-month summer. It was in a sense a festival of spring as it embodied within its intrinsic symbolism the very notion of change and transition between two states (cold/warm, passive/active, death/life) consequently triggering superstitions linked with the fear of a potentially unfruitful

37 *Notes and Queries*, V, 1905, 403.

38 Anders Salomonsson, 'Milk and Folk Belief. With Examples from Sweden,' *Milk and Milk Products from Medieval to Modern Times* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994).

39 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1922) (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 672–673.

40 Mercia MacDermott, *Bulgarian Folk Customs* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998), Tekla Dömötör, *Hungarian Folk Customs* (1972) (Budapest: Corvina, 1988), Octavian Buhociu, *Le Folklore Roumain de Printemps* (Paris: Université de Paris, 1957).

season and hope for a better future. The fires of *Bealtaine* were fires of purification and prophylaxis as opposed to the bonfires lit in urban areas on *May Day* which celebrated the joy of the forthcoming summer. Games, dancing, music, drinking: the traditions linked with *May Day* in Ireland epitomized the happiness of seeing the warm season begin. The origin of those two festivals are distinct: whereas *Bealtaine* was a festival associated with the Celtic past of the island as suggested by its counterparts that are to be found in the Isle of Man, Scotland and even Central Europe, *May Day* was introduced in Ireland and its major urban centres by the English influence over the centuries. The joyful European *May Day* was most likely a pan-Germanic tradition – probably also influenced by Roman calendar customs⁴¹ – and differs substantially from its Celtic counterpart. As both *Bealtaine* and *May Day* were held in early May, the two festivals tended to merge in the minds of the Irish people to the point that the rituals and superstitions of both feasts overlapped and were mistaken for one another, be it by informants, people believing and practicing or even scholars. A new festival was consequently generated: *Bealtaine/May Day*, the gathering of different sets of traditions and their merging into what was thought to be the one and only celebration of May in Ireland eventually became the true modern Irish festival of May as it echoed the different waves of settlement and invasion of the island, mirrored the various cultures coexisting on its soil and reflected the rich and complex history of its inhabitants.

41 *Floralia*, *Ambarvalia*, *Parilia* and possibly other Roman festivals (*Vinalia*, *Robigalia*, *Cerealia*) undoubtedly influenced most of the Romanized countries of Europe, which later reshaped the folklore that is to be found in England and Western Europe.