

## Under the sacred mistletoe

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

WHY do we kiss under the mistletoe at Christmas? What's the origin of the custom?

Well, hanging up mistletoe at Christmas for luck is a very old practice. No doubt kissing under it is a very old idea too, but it seems to be only on record from 1813. In that year John Brand wrote in his "Observations on Popular Antiquities" that mistletoe "had its place assigned it in Kitchens, where it was hung up in great state with its white berries; and whatever female chanced to stand under it, the young man present either had a right or claimed one of saluting her, and of plucking off a berry at each kiss".

The idea of plucking off a berry at each kiss is characteristic of a genuine tradition, in the way it allows nature to dictate the fortunes of man, ensures that there will be losers as well as winners, and provides a keepsake for the boy to give to the girl. Also, of course, it leads to the kind of situation described in "Pickwick Papers". Writes Dickens: "Old Wardle had just suspended, with his own hands, a huge branch of mistletoe, and this same branch of mistletoe instantaneously gave rise to a scene of general and most delightful struggling and confusion . . ."

The custom has absolutely nothing to do with Christianity. It speaks loudly of Christmas as a combination of the feasts of the winter solstice and of the New Year, a time of revelry and licence. In 1861 the Christmas edition of the magazine "Welcome Guest" explained that "kissing a fair one under the mistletoe, and wishing her a happy new year, as you present her with one of the berries for luck, is the Christmas custom of our times". It added, incidentally, that in some places people liked to cast lots for the bough with the most berries; thirty years later it was being complained in the south of England that young men were roving around at Christmas with sprigs of mistletoe in their hats.

Some of the earlier accounts are pretty precise as to the purpose of the practice. Nares' "Glossary" of 1822 explains that when a bush of mistletoe was hung up in a kitchen or servants' hall, "the maid who was not kissed under it at Christmas would not be married in that year". Since all the descriptions I have been able to find are English, it seems to me that it is the kind of divinatory rite practised in Scotland at Hallowe'en or Hogmanay. The penalty for failure could be humiliating or hilarious, depending on your sense of humour. In 1881 it was noted that in Derbyshire, the young men chased any girls who had not been kissed and "swept them down with a house brush or besom".

There is one very instructive analogy to kissing under the mistletoe, and that is kissing under the new moon. C. C. Robinson tells us in his "Dialect of Leeds" of 1861 that "upon seeing the new moon, if a young man kisses the first fair maid he meets with, and without speaking before, he will receive a gift (which would be, no doubt, a pretty smart box on the ear). In the same way, if a maiden kisses the first young man she meets on this occasion, without speaking, *she* will receive a gift (which, we have little doubt of, would be a return of the compliment, if she was any bit like)."

Now in Gaelic Scotland all sorts of things were done at first sight of the new moon, although kissing is not recorded as being one of them. If you fingered the money in your pocket, for example, you could expect prosperity throughout that lunar month. The idea is the same as that of first-footing — whatever happened at the relevant boundary of time would set the pattern for the coming month, season or year, so it was as well to try and influence fate a wee bit.

In particular, the new moon was a time of increase and rising sap and therefore a propitious time for mating, as well as for many other activities. Activities that involved dryness and shrivelling, such as peat-cutting, were best done at the decrease of the moon. In the same way, the winter solstice marked the beginning of the increase of the sun, and we know that in any case the winter has always been a great time for weddings. So it is no surprise to find that Christmas, the feast of the winter solstice, was once a great time for mating.

But why mistletoe? Well, this is our ancient sacred plant, our gift of the gods, our all-healer, our aphrodisiac. Pliny, writing of our Celtic ancestors in his "Natural History" of 77 AD, explained in advance why the man kisses the girl and gives her a berry. "Mistletoe," he says, "will promote conception in females if they make a practice of carrying it about them."

There is more. Mistletoe, he says, works best if found growing on an oak. It works even better if gathered on the first day of the moon without using iron, and if not allowed to touch the earth. It cures epilepsy and ulcers and helps put out fires. In Gaul, he says, the druids believe that whatever grows on an oak is sent from heaven, and is a sign that that tree has been chosen by the god himself. They gather it in a solemn ceremony. A priest in a white robe climbs the oak and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle. It is caught in a white cloth. Then they sacrifice two white bulls and there is a great feast. They believe, he adds, that a potion of mistletoe will make barren animals bring forth.

A book which has a great deal to say about mistletoe is Sir James Frazer's "The Golden Bough". The reason is simple. The golden bough of his title *is* mistletoe. The work itself is a huge dissertation on magic and religion which became a precursor of the modern science of anthropology. Frazer, a classical scholar from Glasgow who was an errant son of the Free Church, set out in the first instance to explain the mysterious cult of Diana at Nemi in Aricia, not far from Rome. In the Arician grove was a sacred tree with a golden bough. If a runaway slave could break off the golden bough he was allowed to challenge Diana's priest to single combat. If he slew him he reigned in his place as "King of the Wood" until he, too, was slain in turn.

Frazer's investigation ranged over the folklore and mythology of the entire world, for that was his method. Without ever mentioning Christianity, he demonstrated that peoples everywhere have set up gods

and ritually killed them for the expiation of sin, or as scapegoats, or to ensure that the crops will grow. This process he unequivocally describes as “the melancholy record of human error and folly which has engaged our attention in this book”. The explanation for the golden bough he finds in the Norse legend of Balder the Beautiful. Balder was a summer god whose name may be echoed in our own *Bealltainn* or May-Day, and who could only be slain by mistletoe being hurled at him.

Frazer’s work was hugely popular at first because of his attractive style, and I will finish by quoting his explanations, firstly of why mistletoe was sacred, and secondly of why it was the golden bough.

“The idea that the life of the oak was in the mistletoe was probably suggested, as I have said, by the observation that in winter the mistletoe growing on the oak remains green while the oak itself is leafless. But the position of the plant — growing not from the ground but from the trunk or branches of the tree — might confirm this idea . . . It is a plausible theory that the reverence which the ancient peoples of Europe paid to the oak, and the connexion which they traced between the tree and their sky-god, were derived from the much greater frequency with which the oak appears to be struck by lightning than any other tree of our European forests. This peculiarity of the tree has seemingly been established by a series of observations instituted within recent years by scientific enquirers who have no mythological theory to maintain.

“However we may explain it, whether by the easier passage of electricity through oakwood than through any other timber, or in some other way, the fact itself may well have attracted the notice of our rude forefathers, who dwelt in the vast forests which then covered a large part of Europe; and they might naturally account for it in their simple religious way by supposing that the great sky-god, whom they worshipped and whose awful voice they heard in the roll of thunder, loved the oak above all the trees of the wood and often descended into it from the murky cloud in a flash of lightning, leaving a token of his presence or of his passage in the riven and blackened trunk and the blasted foliage . . .

“Certain it is that, like some savages, both Greeks and Romans identified their great god of the sky and of the oak with the lightning flash which struck the ground; and they regularly enclosed such a stricken spot and treated it thereafter as sacred. It is not rash to suppose that the ancestors of the Celts and Germans in the forests of Central Europe paid a like respect for like reasons to a blasted oak . . . Can they have thought that the mistletoe dropped on the oak in a flash of lightning? The conjecture is confirmed by the name thunder-besom which is applied to mistletoe in the Swiss canton of Aargau . . .

“It only remains to ask, why was the mistletoe called the Golden Bough? The whitish-yellow of the mistletoe berries is hardly enough to account for the name, for Virgil says that the bough was altogether golden, stem as well as leaves. Perhaps the name may be derived from the rich golden yellow which a bough of mistletoe assumes when it has been cut and kept for some months; the bright tint is not confined to the leaves, but spreads to the stalks as well, so that the whole branch appears to be indeed a Golden Bough. Breton peasants hang up great bunches of mistletoe in front of their cottages, and in the month of June these bunches are conspicuous for the bright golden tinge of their foliage.”

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