

A month not to marry in?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

MAY is the unluckiest month of the year.

Now that may seem an improbable statement. Here we are in the middle of the month and after a hard winter, we are having our first heatwave. Sky blue, hills clothed in green, flowers everywhere, birds singing fit to burst, fields full of lambs, trees that were black and gaunt even a week ago now covered in leaves and shoots. How could anyone possibly say that May is unlucky?

Well, that is exactly what our ancestors said. Let me give the detail, then perhaps by examining it we can decide what the explanation could be.

First of all, it was unlucky to marry in May. This was equally true in the Highlands and Islands, in the Lowlands, and in England. In the Highlands and Islands the time for weddings was November and December. In England the saying was: “Marry in May and rue the day”. In the Lowlands it went “Marry in May, rue for aye”, while another Scots proverb was:

*May birds is aye cheepin’,
May brides is aye greetin’.*

The “greetin’ brides” are clear enough, but one source claims that even the “cheepin’ birds” (sometimes “cheepin’ chickens”) are not what they seem, and that they refer to the children of a May marriage, who are said to ‘die of decay’. This is confirmed by an Ayrshire character in John Galt’s ‘Annals of the Parish’, written in 1831, who declares: “We were married on the 29th day of April, with some inconvenience to both sides, on account of the dread that we had of being married in May, for it is said,

*Of the marriages in May
The bairns die of a decay.”*

Statistics bear it out. In 1874 there were 204 marriages in Glasgow in May, and 703 in June. May remained the least popular month of the year for marriages in Scotland down to the 1950s and beyond. In 1958, for example, out of a total of 42,672 marriages registered in Scotland, only 1,164 took place in May – not one out of 12 as one might have expected, but one out of 36.

The important thing to note about this tradition is its extraordinary longevity. A student who conducted a survey of wedding customs at Sutton Coldfield in 1982 found ‘Marry in May and rue the day’ quoted over and over again in her questionnaires. Over three centuries before, in 1675, ‘Poor Robin’s Almanack’ speaks of a proverb to the effect that ‘Of all the moneths ’tis worst to wed in May’. But in fact it goes back a full two thousand years, because in his ‘Fasti’, written about AD 17, Ovid said of May: “That time, too, was not auspicious for the marriage torches of the widow or of the virgin. She who married then did not long remain a wife. For this reason, too, if proverbs have any weight with you, the common people say that ‘bad prove the wives that are married in May’.”

We have seen that the children of May marriages were said to die of decay. That seems to suggest one reason for not marrying in May, at least in Scotland – it could produce children in February, which was the time of greatest cold and dearth. But then that argument is knocked on the head by Ovid, who lived in sunny Italy.

It also seems to be knocked on the head by another very widespread belief, namely that it was unlucky for a child to be born in May. Such children were thought to be sickly and unlikely to thrive; even if they survived, they would be unlucky all their lives. The grandmother of a writer in ‘Folklore’ in 1957 never failed to remind her family, whenever some misfortune befell her, that she had been born in May.

The earliest record of this tradition is in ‘Notes and Queries’ of 1853: “A May-baby’s always sickly. You may try, but you’ll never rear it.” Since that makes it a great deal later than Ovid, to put it mildly, I am inclined to think that the definition of a ‘May baby’ had come to be misunderstood – it wasn’t a child born in May at all, but one conceived of a marriage in May, and therefore born in or around February.

An associated tradition, first recorded around the same time, has to do with kittens born in May. In Wiltshire and Devon it was believed that cats born in May would bring in snakes and slow-worms instead of mice or rats. In Lancashire it was said that such 'May cats' were unlucky and would 'suck the breath of children' – suffocate them, presumably. On Dartmoor, where a cat was called a 'chet', it was said:

*May chets
Bad luck begets.*

It is distinctly possible, I think, that in this more civilised era, a tradition formerly applied to children was now being applied to cats, and that where once children were ostracised, humiliated and bullied, now a litter of kittens produced in May would be drowned. Likewise, when a cat proved to be a bad mouser, or even brought snakes into the house, the aberration was explained by applying the dismissive label 'May cat'.

Tradition can be a very tenacious thing, however, and can go round in circles. In Herefordshire in 1912 it was recorded that it was unlucky for a child to be born in May, and a frequent taunt was: "You're only a May cat!" And as recently as 1986, according to Opie and Tatem's 'Dictionary of Superstitions', a 57-year-old woman in South Shields told Moira Tatem: "I used to be quite upset as a child when people said to me, when they heard that my birthday was in May, 'Oh, you're a May kitten – you should have been drowned!'"

Tradition is also full of what passes for logical deduction. In Angus, according to the 'Edinburgh Magazine' of 1818, since women refused to marry in May, they also refused to wean their children in that month. May cats being unlucky, the 'Sunday Express' of 9 May 1982 reported that it was unlucky to give or receive a kitten in May. And a century earlier, in 1889, the transactions of the Dorset Field Club had solemnly recorded the transference of the belief to other animals. Ducks hatched in May were more liable to sprawl (straggle?), they claimed, while, amusingly, "Colts born in May have an awkward trick of lying down in water as you ride through . . ."

As I have tried to make clear, I see these modern traditions as resulting from a simple misunderstanding of what a 'May baby' was. I can't say the same for another tradition, even though it only seems to have been on record during the twentieth century – namely, that washing blankets in May will result in a death. From Somerset in 1923 we have:

*If you wash blankets in May
You will wash one of the family away.*

From Oxfordshire, also in the 1920s:

*Wash blankets in May,
You'll soon be under clay.*

From Bristol, 1978:

*Wash a blanket in May,
Wash a loved one away.*

And from Devon, 1987:

*Do not wash blankets in May
Or you will wash a friend away.*

But it sounds as if it is related to the sensible injunction, "Ne'er cast a clout till May is out". Washing blankets was a once-a-year job, and May was the first month in the year when a woman might be tempted to do it. Had the evidence been older I would have suggested that there was something deeper in it, similar to the spectral washer at the ford of Irish tradition whose blanket was a shroud.

The one thing in all this that is definitely deep-rooted, then, is the prohibition on marriage in May. What is so odd about this beautiful month that it should have been unlucky in such a

particular way?

Well, May is the month of May-day, Beltane, the summer quarterday. In the Celtic world, and that of other European peoples, it was matched in importance only by Samhain, Hallowe'en, the winter quarterday. Since Samhain is a festival of death and Beltane of life, and both were times of chaos when the otherworld reigned supreme, it is hard at first sight to see why marriage should be good in one and bad in the other. But I will make one or two suggestions.

Firstly, Samhain was a New Year festival. Marriage in the New Year, a time for new beginnings, would be considered natural. Conception before the turn of the year resulting in birth after it would be less in accordance with nature.

Secondly, while the celebration of Samhain retreated west with the retreat of the Celts, leaving Hallowe'en as a festival held only in Ireland and the western half of Britain, the celebration of Beltane spread all over Europe. It is only in Ireland and the western half of Britain (and now therefore America!) that Hallowe'en is more important than May-Day.

Thirdly, the forces of the otherworld took a greater interest in matters of fertility at Beltane than at any other time of year, so marriage then was fraught with danger. Referring to Angus, a writer in the 'Edinburgh Magazine' of 1818 reported: "I have heard it said by the old women, that both fairies and witches have more influence, and take a greater delight in playing their pranks in the month of May, than at any other season."

Fourthly, May-Day, the start of summer, was a time of sexual licence which civic and religious authorities all over Europe found difficult to control. This may have been as true in Ovid's day in Rome as in, say, Peebles in 1571, when the corporation doubled the watch 'on Beltane even, Beltane at even, and the morn after Beltane day' to control festivities. Through most of the recorded history of England the morning of May-Day was spent gathering flowers and dancing around a Maypole, and this led to May having a reputation for debauchery; in his 'Dialogue against Dauncing' of 1582, to take one example, Christopher Fetherston told a story of 'ten maidens who went to set May, and nine of them came home with child'.

It seems to me, then, that the idea of marriage in May must have been more than a little tainted.

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