

Chapter Six

The Celebration

The importance of celebration in Druidry cannot be overstated. Eight major festivals celebrate the cycle of the year and, if rites of passage that mark important events in our lives are not woven into a festival rite, another celebration is declared to honour these too. Both are an expression of wonder at the natural world, enabling each soul more powerfully to attune to the significance of every step along the way.

Celebration strongly marks the importance of community. Though some in the tradition celebrate the festivals alone, an increasing number congregate, affirming the power of their rite and sharing laughter, strength and teachings. The community is drawn together, witnessing the passage of time and the changes it brings, and assuring mutual support. Rites of passage are witnessed – dedications, vows and thanksgivings.

The family is honoured in Druidry and many open gatherings actively welcome children. Some insist they behave respectfully when they reach a certain age, this being an important part of the child's education about the faith. In a tradition which holds strongly the tenet of honouring the ancestors, the children – our descendants – are also honoured, invited to share and find their place within our society, taking responsibility, finding pride in their heritage, connection with the land, certainty and self esteem.

Time is also allowed for adult ceremonies when, with no children present, the energy can be more intense.

Creativity comes into its own at festival celebrations, which usually include at least one *eisteddfod*. At *gorseddau*, gatherings of Bards, the *eisteddfod* is an integral part of the festivities. At an *eisteddfod* any person wishing to share the results of her *awen*, her divine inspiration, is given the circle centre to perform. The most usual forms of expression are music, song, storytelling and poetry.

The Druid Calendar

The Druids' command of astronomy was famous throughout the ancient world, bringing knowledge of nature's cycles and sufficient information to create a calendar through which they might establish some certainty about celestial events, from the pathways of the sun and moon to eclipses and stellar patterns. Maintaining this information at an initiatory level, without committing it to writing, would have been another element that allowed Druids to maintain their elite position in society.

As a result, little information has reached us, though we are told in Classical texts that Druids measured time by the moon and by nights, not days. This is shown on the calendar which did survive, a bronze tablet 2,000 years old, found a century ago in Coligny, central France. A tablet of religious festivals, it marks auspicious and

inauspicious days spanning a five-year period, and would almost certainly have been crafted on Druids' advice.

There is no evidence that the Celtic people marked the solstices or equinoxes with celebration, nor are these solar events mentioned in the Welsh or Irish medieval texts. It is in the alignments of megalithic structures built by the predecessors of the Celts that we find a focus on these dates. West Kennet Long Barrow in Wiltshire, for example, has an equinoctial alignment. The Winter Solstice is marked at the developed passage graves of Newgrange in Ireland and Maes Howe in the Orkneys, while Stonehenge has a prominent Midsummer alignment. The different focus of temples and tombs suggests either that people travelled to different locations to celebrate events or that local groups observed different nights or days.

So what are the festivals celebrated by modern Druids?

The wheel of eight festivals was brought to Druidry by Ross Nichols who, in the late 1940s, was a member of the Ancient Druid Order, which at the time was celebrating only the two equinoxes and the Summer Solstice. Rumour has it that they would have marked the Winter Solstice too but the weather was a disincentive. During his research into Irish folklore Nichols came across the festivals of Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnasadh and decided that these ought to be brought into modern Druidry.

When his idea was rejected by the hierarchy of the ADO, he showed his mandala of festivals to his friend Gerald Gardner. Gardner, who was in the process of putting together the elements of modern Wicca, immediately incorporated it into his ideas. His coven was presumably the first to put it into practice in the early 1950s, while Nichols had to wait until 1964, when he led a breakaway group from the ADO to form the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids.

The wheel flows so beautifully, every six weeks or so marking a point in the cycle of changing, bringing the community together, bringing our consciousness to presence, that many newcomers to the tradition find it hard to believe it hasn't always been that way.

The Festivals Of The Sun

To modern Druids the eight holy days are equally important, though media attention and public ritual have bought the focus onto the Summer Solstice perhaps more than any other. The time of the 'highest light' does draw attention, particularly in our temperate and temperamental climate.

Establishing a calendar at the latitude of the British Isle is best effected by the sun, watching the clear stretch in its path through the year from winter to summer. While other calendars may be created by the rising and setting of more distant stars, our climate doesn't allow such reliable sky watching. The dramatic shifts in light and temperature we experience through the year direct our focus to the sun, the source of the change, the centre of our circling world's view.

Midwinter

In our cool temperate climate it is the rebirth of the sun at Midwinter, when the days start to get longer, that is seen by many in the tradition as the time of greatest celebration and this festival has grown and grown; the Winter Solstice is now blurred in many non-Pagan minds with the commercial exuberance of Christmas. The instinctive relief that the days are getting longer, that darkness has reached its peak, floods through the festival, secular, Christian and Pagan. Our Germanic ancestors, who called the festival Yule, established the tradition of celebrating for 12 days – another aspect of Paganism taken up Christianity.

In Druidry the Winter Solstice is celebrated around 21 December, when the sun enters Capricorn, or three days later on the date we call Midwinter, 24 December, when after a pause at its lowest point the sun once again starts its journey back towards the centre. Because in Druidry, as in Judaism, the day begins at dusk, celebrations kick off the evening before.

The festival is also called Alban Arthan. The word *alban* is thought to come from an early Brythonic (British) word meaning 'bright', while *arthan* is a later Welsh word possibly referring to the constellation of the Great Bear in the northern winter sky. The alternative, Alban Arthuan, is a later corruption and refers to the old British hero king, Arthur. The newborn sun returns as saviour, changing the tides, bringing light into the darkness, in the same way that all great heroes have come into lands under threat, including Jesus and Arthur.

From a female perspective, where the darkness of winter is felt to be the nourishing womb, the rich fertile earth, the sun is seen as the spirit light which is never extinguished, shining even in the void of death, inspiring conception, new growth, rebirth.

Midwinter is celebrated, as are all the eight and indeed most rites in the tradition, with a ceremony held within the temple sanctuary of stones or wood or simply energy, where peace is affirmed and the circle cast, consecrated and blessed, and into which are invited the spirit presences, the ancestors and deities, with whom the Grove normally works.

The heart of the ceremony is the ritual ending of mourning for the death of the light, in whatever godform or abstract that is perceived. The year which has drawn to its close with the onset of winter, bringing with it the chaos and uncertainty of darkness, is now left behind. The miracle of birth has stopped the running flow into the darkness: the tide is turned.

A new world is emerging, albeit still enfolded in the arms of its dark mother, and her energy still surrounds us. With reverence we acknowledge her being and her gift, the infant light. The Spirit child is reborn and all who have gathered in sacred space honour his arrival with wonder, bringing vows of dedication together with offerings of their own spirit, strength and beauty.

Folk customs may be incorporated into the ceremony or brought to the celebrations around the fire and the feast afterwards, depending on what is local or appropriate,

including the burning of the winter oak log symbolising the spirit of the hearth fire that warms the community. Mistletoe is distributed, carrying its magical blessings of healing, fertility and presence. Boughs of evergreen decorate the house, holding the spirit of life through the dark winter months. Presents are given, expressing the energy of our spirit, honouring the new year that is born and affirming bonds of love and community.

This is often an intimate celebration, in the heart of winter when few will or can travel far, a time of caring, sharing and feasting with our close friends and family around us.

Spring Equinox

The Spring Equinox is celebrated between 20 and 23 March, on the date when the sun moves into Aries and day is the same length as night. It is also known as Alban Eilir, sometimes written as Eiler, *eilir* being Welsh for 'regeneration' or 'spring'. Alban Eilir is translated poetically as 'Light of the earth'.

Christian tradition has again used many Pagan symbols evident in Eilir celebrations, although in Christianity the festival is aligned with the Judaic Passover and is called Easter. The Germanic name for this Pagan celebration is Ostara. This is the name of a fertility goddess and comes from the same root as the word 'Easter', as do the words 'oestrus' and 'oestrogen'.

The equinox is a time of new life, daffodils and cherry blossom, fledglings, lambs running in fields. The symbolism of the egg is prominent. It is a time of celebration of childhood, with games to be played.

This is another turning point in the year, not across a peak but across a point of balance. The darkness is behind us and ahead is the light into which we can grow. As with the Autumn Equinox, many who are sensitive to the energy of the cycle feel drawn into the balance over a few weeks before and after the actual date, as if the process of settling is unsettling in itself. At the Spring Equinox this is particularly difficult, with the energy running fast and increasing all the time. The sap is rising.

The core of the Eilir ceremony is the blessing of the seeds that will become the year's harvest. On a practical level within the rite, seeds might be blessed and sown in pots that will be cared for on windowsills or in greenhouses, protected still from the frosts. While these seeds will usually be a part of the work of caring for the land which the Druid takes part in through the year, they also represent other projects. They are ritually blessed with the elemental forces of flowing breath air, of sun fire warmth, of moisture and rain and, of course, rich soil earth, an act which simultaneously blesses those plans which are beginning to be put into action, consecrating them with elemental strengths – our intellect and knowing, courage and energy, intuition and motivation, and our ability to stabilise and manifest.

Now the Sun Child has grown and his heat is touching the Earth, drawing up into growth. In the rite this is often played out by the spring maiden and young sun god, aware of their sexuality yet not yet old enough to use it. They dance, not touching, shy and innocent, filled with the energy of life renewed.

The tides are high, the moon is large and bright. Eilir is a festival filled with laughter and anticipation, excitement for the growth ahead as the balance tips towards the light.

Midsummer

The Summer Solstice is the festival most associated with Druids, though it is of no more importance in the tradition than any other festival. It is celebrated around 21 June when the sun rises at its most northern point, climbing highest in the sky, as he passes from Gemini into Cancer, or on Midsummer's Day three days later on 24 June, after the pause when the sun begins its descent.

The festival is also known as Alban Hefin, sometimes written as Heruin, the Welsh word *hefin* meaning 'summer'. Alban Heruin is referred to as 'Light of the Shore'.

The festival is a celebration of the peak, and the further north we travel the more potent is the rite. The sun born at Midwinter has pushed back the powers of darkness to just a few night hours. But in the process he has exhausted himself (in many solar myths he is wounded in the fight) and it is at this point that his hold relaxes. Darkness once again begins to creep silently in.

The interplay of the forces of nature continues, weaving threads of tension, life and death, dark and light, male and female, pushing and pulling. If Midwinter is about the power of the dark feminine, the shrine of the womb, the deep valley, the cauldron, the 'inner' and receptive, then Midsummer is a time of honouring the power of the light, the masculine, the mountain top, the sword's blade, the outer and assertive. Both qualities exist between within every soul and are expressed in the changing flows of life; at Hefin we acknowledge the outward expression of ourselves, our vitality and strength, all we have used in the push for growth and progress, and we learn when to stop.

The celebration for Alban Hefin often begin at dusk the evening before and include three distinct parts; the rite that initiates the night vigil, the rite of dawn and that of noon. There is high celebration of the power of the Sun King, often enacted through the replaying of a myth. Thanks and honour are given, and dedications made to the power and glory of the solar deity, saviour, hero. Through the night vigil the eisteddfod keeps the focus strong and laughter loud, and at dawn the power of the sun is honoured with awe and offerings. At noon the rite changes, as the turning tide is acknowledged. Teachings are shared of the need to balance power with justice, strength with wisdom. Our attention is drawn from the light that glints off the sword to the Earth, the goddess of our land.

As with all the festivals there is a mine of folklore connected to Midsummer. Though the sources of much of this are lost in the mists of time, there is good literary evidence that the ancient Celts of France and Wales celebrated Midsummer by rolling burning wheels down hilltops from great hilltop fires. Divination was common practice at this time.

Autumn Equinox

The Autumn Equinox is celebrated between 20 and 23 September, when the night is as long as the day once again and our sun star slips in front of the constellation of Libra. Also known as Alban Elfed, sometimes written as Alban Elude, *elfed* meaning 'autumn', it is translated as 'Light of the Water'.

The balance is more poignant at this time than in the rush of spring and this is often the quietest of the festivals. The harvest is in; it is a time of acceptance of all we have and what we lack, a time of reflection on what we have achieved. The element of water is strong, the ebb and flow of the ocean tide, as we stand in the west of our sacred circle, reaching out to understand the mysteries of balance. This is a time of sharing gifts of abundance and strength, a time when participants bring to the rite offerings and presents for each other and the gods.

At many Groves it is usual to bless and share food and drink at all the festival rites. This is often in the form of a large round loaf of homebaked bread and honey mead (or cider, ale or wine) passed around the circle in a drinking horn. After giving thanks to the goddess of the land and to the lord of light, an acknowledging the alchemy that transforms the grain into bread and blossom's nectar into mead, the gathering will ask for their blessings on the loaf and the horn. The first break of bread, the first drink of the mead are given back to the land, to Mother Earth, the spirits of place and, if appropriate for the rite, more is given to the ancestors through the flames of the fire.

If a Grove does not celebrate this feast at every rite, most will do so at the Harvest Equinox.

The Festivals Of The Seasons

While the solar festivals are fixed points in the cycle of the year, the other four mark the opening of a season. The energy of each of these festivals is evident throughout the three months that follow until the next one looms, altered by the solar turning point in the middle. Within Pagan Druidry, the seasonal festivals are most commonly known by the Irish Gaelic names Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnasadh. They are also known as quarter days or lunar or fire festivals.

These festivals are not defined by precise cosmic events, but by the cycle of nature herself, by the dance of the weather gods and spirits of place. They require us not to look to the heavens but to the Earth. They are set within our soul, watching the leaves on the trees, the animals, insects, birds, feeling the shifting temperature, the changing light, within and around.

Samhain

Though the spelling of the Irish varies the pronunciation tends to remain the same, so Samhain is also seen as Samhuinn and Samain but is spoken as *sow-inn*. The meaning is probably 'Summer's End'. The Welsh name is Calan Gaeaf, meaning 'Winter Calends'.

For those who measure by the seasons, Samhain arrives with the first frost. Some plan their rite around the full moon of Scorpio that passes through Taurus. Those who work around a constant date celebrate Samhain on 1 November, with the rites beginning the evening before. The Pagan festival has been overlaid nowadays by both the Christian All Hallows, All Souls and All Saints and the secular Guy Fawkes.

Medieval texts imply that Samhain was the most important festival in Ireland, a time when laws were made and kings instated. Yet also it was a time of madness and danger, when monsters caused havoc and faery women bewitched young men, enchanting them away. *The Yellow Book of Lecan* refers to Samhain as 'the feast of Mongfind', a legendary witch queen said to have married an early high king of Tara, which implies that she was an incarnation of the spirit of the land.

Traditionally at Samhain, livestock that would not last the winter were slaughtered with ritual thanks. Meat would be cured, salted, put aside, and the tables of the feast laden with bloodcake and offal which could not be preserved, together with the blackberries and fruit of late autumn.

Samhain marks the end of summer and a cycle of growth. It is a time of sacrifice.

Ahead is the winter and decisions need to be made as to what we will carry through the long cold months, what is redundant, what will not survive, and what must be protected and nurtured as the source of next year's wealth.

So the festival rite is a process of letting go, beginning with an acknowledgement of what we have gained, how we have changed and who we have become, and followed by a period of mourning, knowing what we must release – and effectively letting it go. The past is gone.

At this time, those who have died during the year are honoured and gifts are given with love and thanks, perhaps with candles being lit and set to drift on water, symbolising the journey travelled by the dead over the ocean to the place of the setting sun. That journey between the worlds, between life and death, is at Samhain most easily made.

Our ancestors who would join the rite in peace are invited to share and the feast is blessed and offered to the Earth, the spirits and all in the circle.

Then the darkness of winter is welcomed in and a period of release is declared when chaos is accepted. From this tradition trick o'treating was reintroduced. Now bonfires are lit, the Summer Kings burnt, firework set off – and the feasting begins.

Imbolc

Imbolc or Imbolg, by the calendar, is celebrated on 2 February. Pronounced *im-olk*, it is thought to refer to the ewes' milk which flows when the lambs are born. Some mark the time of Imbolc by the birth of the first lambs, while others look for the first snow-drops. To some it is the festival of the full moon of Aquarius which passes through the constellation of Leo.

In Welsh the festival is known as Gwyl Fair, ‘The Feast of Mary’, or the newer alternative Gwyl Forwyn, ‘The Feast of the Virgin’, though some Druids, even the Pagan, use the Christian term Candlemas. In Ireland and parts of Scotland it is the festival of Brigit, Bride or Brighid, an ancient goddess whose worship was transferred to a Christian saint.

This is the first festival of spring, when the Sun Child born in the depths of winter lifts his face and the Earth is touched with the first rays of warmth. The fire of Imbolc is the tender light of new life that flickers in the candles of the rite, the forge of the metal-working goddess who cleanses and re-forms our souls ready for the year ahead, the fire of poetic inspiration.

For many Druids Imbolc is the only festival entirely focused on the feminine deity and the rite is often powerfully gentle, woven with poetry, the circle veiled in white, expressing the innocence of the child. At this time we honour our mothers and our mothers’ mothers, with offerings of thanks to all who have given us life. Plans are shared, our aspirations and dreams, still abstract and wrapped in hope. White candles, planted in a cauldron of earth or water (symbolizing the body of the goddess or the waters of the womb), are blessed and lit, infused with our love, devotion, dreams and prayers.

Beltane

The spelling of this festival varies from Belteinne to Bealtine, the most common being Beltane, which is closest to its pronunciation. The word can be translated as ‘the bright (or fortunate) fire’ and some make the connection with the Irish Balor, the Gallic god Belenus and the Welsh Beli Mawr, all ancestral deities associated with life and fire. This is the first festival of summer, celebrated by the calendar on 1 May, with the rites beginning the previous evening, or on the Full Moon of Taurus as it passes through Scorpio. Those who mark their quarter days by the flow nature celebrate with the first pinky white blossoms of the hawthorn tree, also known as the may.

In Welsh it is Calan Mai, ‘The Calends of May’ and in Welsh medieval literature many important events take place at this time. The date features in the same way that Samhain does in the Irish tradition, with demons stealing newborn children, dragons fighting each other and the gates to the faery realm standing dangerously open.

In the Irish literature we are told that the old gods, the Tuatha de Dannan, arrived in Ireland at Beltane. *Cormac’s Glossary* (of around 900 CE) relates that all the fires were extinguished at Beltane, to be rekindled from those lit by Druids who chanted spells over them, infusing them with magical properties, and cattle were driven between fires on hilltops as a charm against disease before being led to their summer pastures.

The Beltane rite in modern Druidry focuses on fertility: for those wanting children, for the land, farmed and wild, for our own souls and dreams. The twin fires of the rite express the duality of nature, the tension of opposites craving union, the source of creativity.

The Earth has come alive now with energy bright and strong; the air humming, filled with the scent of flowers; the forest is green. The young Sun king and the Spring Maiden have grown to sexual maturity and the ritual is the dance of their coming together. She is now the May Queen, with a crown of hawthorn, and he comes to her as the Lord of the Wildwood, the green man dressed in leaves or the sun god himself. Their dance is infectious and they leap the fires, blessing them with fertility, creativity and good fortune, encouraging all who have gathered to leap the flames and be blessed.

There are many folk customs around Beltane, such as washing one's face with dew before dawn to bring beauty, picking certain herbs said to inspire attraction, blessing the bees who give us mead, the dance around the May pole, and the disappearing of couples into the forest and fields to make love in the moonlight. It is a time of music and dance, youthful energy and freedom.

Lughnasadh

Lughnasadh, Lughnasad or Lughnasa, pronounced *loo-nass-ah*, is the festival of the god Lugh. In the medieval Irish texts it is also referred to as Bron Trogain, or the first day of the Trogain month, and is now commonly known as Lammas, the Saxon word meaning 'loaf mass', or by the Welsh term Gwyl Awst, meaning 'The Feast of August'. The third festival of summer, it is the celebration of the first harvest of our local staple grain, usually wheat or barley. Some hold their rites on the full moon of Leo as it passes through Aquarius. By the calendar Lughnasadh is 1 August.

However the festival was celebrated, and it appears to have drifted across Britain and Ireland, it was always the celebration of the first fruits of the harvest. There were fairs (the most documented being at Tailtiu/Teltown in Ireland), the making of straw figures, the dressing or decoration of wells with prayers, horse races and other games. Those in search of work would be hired for the year, rents and other legal disputes would be settled, and marriages made.

The season of growth since Beltane has come to its end and now we enter the season of reaping. Myths are often played out during the Lughnasadh rites, with the Corn King offering himself up to be sacrificed and being reborn as the loaf of newly baked bread. The grain is also taken to make ale and the straw is used for bedding through the winter to come. The summer is waning. The power of the sun god has been given into the yellow corn.

The sacrifice of the king was at one time very real, as blood was offered back to the gods who had given the grain. The focus of the rite now is still this weave of exuberant life and release to death. It is both a celebration of what we have sown and nurtured, which has now come to fruition, and in acknowledgement of its dying as it dries in the heat of summer, giving itself up to our needs. The hard work of harvesting must be done, with acceptance of our responsibility for gathering it in. After the grain the dark fruits and berries will ripen, bringing an all together different energy to the feasts to come.

Lughnasadh is often the biggest of the festivals, with people travelling from far and wide to share the joys of their harvest, bringing music and food, and trading crafts and stories.

One of the festivals will be coming up in the next month or so from the time of your reading this chapter. Which one is it? What season are we in? What is happening to the energy of the land and how does that relate to the energy of your body and soul? How would you like to celebrate this coming festival?

Rites of Passage

The cycle of festivals allows us to take distinct steps through the year, acknowledging the changes and our own progress every six weeks. It is also felt necessary within the tradition to make clear statements of our progress through the cycle of our lives. So the Druid family is offered rites of passage which carry the members from conception to death. These ceremonies of celebration, dedication and transformation are to some extent individually crafted to be specifically relevant to the people involved. They are designed to aid processes of change, to bring confidence and affirm support.

The newly conceived foetus is blessed, the newborn child welcomed and formally named, and in both rites the mother, father, grandparents and ancestors are honoured. Children are blessed with the falling of their first tooth and at other stages when they are able to take on responsibilities for themselves. Puberty is critically important, when the girl has her first rite of menstruation and the boy his first manhood rite, with teachings shared, taboos untangled, responsibilities understood.

Rites of marriage come in different forms in the tradition, from the relationship which is declared to the community, a handfasting which can be undone simply by returning to the place and walking separately away, to the life-long union blessed with binding vows of love and commitment, the latter usually going hand in hand with a legal ceremony at a registry office.

At the farther side of life is the rite of elder, taken when a woman is into her menopause and when a man senses the same shift in his body, the focus moving from the physical to the spiritual. Rites of dying, death and mourning are also practised. Working through the processes of healing, honouring and releasing with a profound understanding of the spirit's continued consciousness after leaving the body.

Ceremonies such as baby namings, weddings and funerals can be performed publicly in such a way that family and friends, both Pagan and non-Pagan, can participate without compromising their own religious beliefs.

What rite of passage in your life do you feel was not properly marked? This may be because it was carried out in a spiritual tradition you did not relate to, or because it was not deemed necessary or relevant. What were the issues you feel should have been addressed or honoured? Perhaps you would like to put together ideas about how that rite of passage could be performed now.

If you cannot think of a rite which was not done in your past, consider how you might like to mark a changing point now or in the future.

Rites Of Initiation

Rites of passage take place all through the journey into the tradition: the process of becoming a Druid is a life long experience. There is no hierarchy of initiatory grades which one can or must pass through in order to increase one's status or access to teachings. There is no end point.

Pledging with sincerity a personal commitment to the land, to the tradition, to one's ancestry is a profound step which in itself takes the individual through gateways into new spiritual perspectives. Many Groves and Orders offer a rite of initiation that marks the step into that group, this often being woven together with personal commitment to the journey, a dedication to change and awaken.

On a deeper level, initiation happens as a result of having passed through doorways which activate a significant shift in consciousness. These doorways are often more like long dark tunnels of the subconscious, or veils in the soul's perception, which act as barriers, holding us in a world that we know while constraining our abilities to reach higher potentials. Walking through these boundaries often requires breaking through intense fear. The rite of initiation will then follow the experience, as an acknowledgement and thanksgiving to the forces who have guided us.

As with all rites of passage, initiations may be done both privately, between an individual, her guides, gods and ancestors and the spirits of the land, or with her Druid teacher, or more publicly, witnessed by a Grove or the wider community. Each is considered equally valid.