The celebration of the passing seasons in traditional folksongs that derive from pre-Christian and traditional folk beliefs is no doubt familiar to the majority of readers, and it is relatively common for singers of traditional folksongs to put together a calendar of songs, at some time in their lives. There are some very familiar and popular songs that might be chosen to make up such a calendar and there are quite a number of songs to choose from. Some of the songs I have chosen for the essay that follows are probably new to many readers, and it is hoped that the essay will help to put the ancient songs and rituals into perspective. This essay is the text of a workshop created to look at folksongs that relate to pre-Christian ritual in English folklore. Old rituals still abound in England, but many of them have been created in relatively recent times and have little to do with ancient custom as viewed from the perspective of this workshop.

One good example of these later and unrelated customs is the well-dressing of the five wells in the village of Tissington, in Derbyshire. During the Black Death, in the middle of the Fourteenth Century, Tissington was spared from the ravages of the Bubonic Plague. Villagers believed this was specifically due to the miraculous properties of their well waters. Every year since 1530, therefore, on Ascension Day, the wells have been garlanded and decorated with flower petals, buds, and berries set into soft clay, making wonderfully intricate and colourful pictures of Biblical scenes. Religious services are also held before the wells on this day, the Thursday before Whitsun. Although the well-dressing at Tissington was begun as a result of local beliefs concerning an episode at a precise time within the Christian period, it should be noted that well-dressing is a widespread custom throughout Europe and can be traced considerably further back than the advent of Christianity.

Another tradition that at first looks to be rather obviously of Christian origin is the hot-cross bun that is baked for Good Friday. It has been strongly suggested, however, that hot-cross buns are, in fact, descended from a Roman, four-section, ceremonial bun. Certainly such buns have been found in Roman temples dedicated to pre-Christian deities and in other pre-Christian, Roman rites and possibly the Romans brought the custom with them to Britain. One item of evidence for this source is that hot-cross bun ceremonies are most firmly established and have their longest and strongest survival in areas that were previously occupied by the Romans. However it should also be noted that there is evidence to suggest that the baking of crossed buns may be an older custom than that of Rome, and of wider cultural distribution.

Incidentally, folk rhymes relating to pre-Christian folklore tend to be rather more common than folk songs and, with a little diligent research, these can still be found in odd corners of literature. Books containing the lore of children, within whose traditions folk rhymes have tended to be more extensively preserved, might be an especially good place to start looking.

Before attempting to put the English ritual folk songs given here into a coherent calendar, it would be useful to quote from Marie-Louise Sjoestedt’s Gods and Heroes of the Celts:

> We see that the Celtic calendar is regulated not by the solar year, by solstice and equinox, but by the agrarian and pastoral year, by the beginning and end of the tasks of cattle raising and agriculture. So, too, Celtic mythology is dominated by goddesses of the earth, and one looks in vain for solar deities. (68)

If we break up the songs that follow into calendar groups, we find that half are aligned with three of the major Celtic festivals—those of Samhain, Beltaine, and Lughnasadh—and the other half, although being part of the European, Celtic tradition, would also appear to have been influenced by Roman, pre-Christian beliefs. All of them, however, have been adopted by the Christian church, and Celtic celebration days became saints’ days.

**Can Wassel**

*(Wassail Song)*

The first song plainly stems from European Celtic tradition but is celebrated on a day that falls mid-way between the Kalends of January, i.e., between December 26 and January 6. Kalends was a Roman resurrection festival that celebrated a new beginning with the new year. It was a time of year when malignant spirits, dead souls, and demons rose from the underworld, only to be banished, once more, through the festivities, back to the underworld. In order to help banish the spirits, it was common to represent them by dressing up in disguise, or to mask oneself, and to behave with licentious and drunken abandon. Both the disguising and the practical joking that typically accompanied the revels are reflected still in the plays and songs of mummers and, perhaps more moderately, by wassailers.

Wassail comes from the Anglo-Saxon words *wés* (be) and *hal* (whole)—in other words, "Be of good health." Generally, good luck came to the householder simply by being visited by the wassailers although some ceremonies also involved the wassailers giving a token of good luck to the householder. This is especially notable in regard to the house visit that, in the old days, went with the song "Hunting the Wren" *(q.v.)*, when the householder plucked a
feather from the tiny bird to keep as a charm. In return for their visit the wassailers received good luck offerings of cider, ale, food or coin.

Evidence of the extent of old European wassailing traditions are not too difficult to find. For example, a verse in the "Staffordshire Wassail Song," collected by Bishop Thomas Percy about 1760, goes:

We'll hang a silver knapkin upon a golden spear,
And come no more a wassailing until another year.

In Roumania, the Calusari dancers carry with them a pole decorated at the end with silver or silken napkins tied together with the potently magic vegetable, garlic.

Most wassail songs mention a wooden bowl to receive the offering from the householder. Variously, the bowl was made of ash, elder, maple or mulberry; rosemary was also mentioned in some versions, although it is questionable whether rosemary can grow to the size required to make a bowl of its wood. Cecil Sharp contends that the maintenance in modern times of the tradition of the wooden wassail bowl—quite apart from the obvious fact that wooden bowls are a relic of the days when household vessels were commonly made of wood—reflects the ancient ecclesiastical edict against the use of wooden vessels for Christian church ceremonials.

Three of the songs that follow are from Cornwall, in England's West Country, although folk traditions there are not necessarily any stronger than in other parts of England. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Devon and Cornwall did not begin to exchange their Celtic ceremonies and practices for those of Rome until the 10th Century, following Athelstan's conquest of Cornwall, or West Wales, as the Devonshire-Cornish peninsula was sometimes referred to about that time (925-940).

Versions of the first song, "Can Wassel," and the fourth song, "Hal-An-Tow," both of which are from Cornwall, are to be found in other parts of England as a direct result of the migration of Cornish miners.

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1. Now Christmas is over and the New Year begins
   Pray open the door and let us come in.

Refrain: With our wassail, wassail, wassail
       And joy come to our jolly wassail.

2. Good mistress and master sitting down by the fire,
   Whilst we poor wassailers are travelling the mire.

3. This ancient old house we will kindly salute,
   It is the old custom, you need not dispute.

4. We are here in this place, we orderly stand,
   We're jolly wassailers with a bowl in our hand

5. Good mistress and master, how can you forbear,
   Come fill up our bowl with cider and beer.

6. We hope that your apple trees will prosper and bear,
   That we may have cider when we come next year.

7. We hope that your barley will prosper and grow
   That you may have plenty and more to bestow.

8. And may you have corn and plenty of grain,
   That we may have cake, too, when we come again.
9. Good mistress and master sitting down at your ease,  
Put your hand in your pocket and give what you please.

10. We wish you a blessing and a long time to live,  
Since you've been so free and so willing to give.

Pace-Egging Song  
March-April

Easter is a Lunar festival that occurs on the first Sunday following the full moon of the vernal equinox. It can, therefore, fall anywhere between March 22 and April 25. In Teutonic myth, the Easter hare—the sacred and sacrificial animal of Ostra (or Eostre—the Teutonic goddess of dawn and the Spring)—laid the eggs which in our times she is only said to deliver. In the term "pace egg," "pace" is, ultimately, derived from the Hebrew word for Passover. This has now evolved, through Greek and Latin, into association with the Resurrection. As the Celtic festival was also concerned with rebirth (albeit a rebirth in nature), it is relatively easy to see how convenient it was for the Roman church to adopt existing, pre-Christian festivals.

There are three main customs that still exist relating specifically to pace-egging. These are the singing of songs from door to door (which might properly be called Easter carolling or wassailing), egg rolling, and the staging of Pace-Egging plays. The majority of these customs are held in the northern half of England.

Well, the first to come in is Lord Nelson, you see,  
With a bunch of blue ribbon tied under his knee,  
And a star on his breast that like silver do shine,  
And I hope he remembers it's pace-egging time.

Refrain: Here's one, two, three jolly lads all in one mind,  
We are come a-pace-egging, and I hope you'll prove kind,  
And I hope you'll prove kind, with your eggs and strong beer,  
For we'll come no more nigh you until the next year.

2. And the next that comes in, it is Lord Collingwood,  
He fought with Lord Nelson 'till he shed his blood,  
And he's come from the sea, old England to view,  
And he's come a-pace-egging with all of his crew.

3. And the last that comes in is old Tosspot, you'll see,  
He's a valiant old fellow in every degree,  
He's a valiant old man and he wears a pigtail,  
And all his delight is in drinking mulled ale.

May Day Carol  
(Padstow 'Obby 'Oss Song)

There are many songs of May Day rituals, including the many Maypole songs. Of these "To the Maypole Haste Away" ("Staines Morris") is probably one of the earliest that might come to mind. I have chosen the one below, however, because it is sung during a particularly involved, colourful, old and awesome festival, as is the song which follows this one.

The Padstow Hobby Horse Day begins on May Eve, just at midnight, when wassail type verses are sung from house to house, with particular people being singled out by name in the verses. In the morning the young men gather greenery to decorate the town and, at about 10 o'clock the two hobby horses come out of their stables to rove separately through the town, occasionally darting towards a young woman in an attempt to catch her under its 'skirt.' It was expected that a woman caught in this fashion would be married by Christmas.

Over the years both the song and the various ceremonies connected with the original hobby horse, "The Old 'Oss," have changed somewhat (Kennedy 230), and a second hobby horse, "The Blue Ribbon," was added. As to the origin of the Padstow Hobby Horse, Padstowians tell of a time when the men of the village were abroad and a ship of Danish marauders pulled in to shore. The women of Padstow constructed the Old 'Oss and pranced about with it on the cliff top. The Danes thought that it was the Devil himself and hurriedly sailed away. There is also a tradition of an ancient life-giving horse sacrifice which may well be
Maypole, the blatant symbol of fertility, that is set up in the town square.

1. Unite and unite and let us all unite,
   For summer is i-cumen in today,
   And whither we are going, we all will unite,
   In the merry morning of May.

2. With a merry ring and now the joyful Spring,
   O give to us a cup of ale and the merrier we will sing

3. The young men of Padstow, they might if they would,
   They might have built a ship and gilded it all in gold.

4. The young women of Padstow, they might if they would,
   They might have built a garland with the white rose and the red

5. Where are those young men that now here should dance?
   For some they are in England and some they are in France
   (a) O where is St. George?
       O where is he-o?
       He’s out in his long-boat,
       All on the salt sea-o.
   (b) Up flies the kite,
       Down falls the lark-o,
       Aunt Ursula Birdhood she had an old ewe
       And she died in her own park-o.

6. With a merry ring and now the joyful Spring,
   So happy are those little birds and the merrier they will sing

Hal-An-Tow

"Hal-An-Tow" is sung during a processional into the countryside to gather flowers and branches to decorate the town. The procession is accompanied by Robin Hood and other characters from the old May Day mummers' plays, along with the Dragon and St. Michael, the patron saint of Cornwall.

Helston, in South West Cornwall, is the home of two processional with their own songs. One, the Furry Dance, has also been popularized by a stirring modern song, "The Floral Dance," and both of the ceremonials are performed on May 8, which is the saint day of St. Michael, but is especially significant for another reason. Andrew Cheviot, in his Proverbs, Proverbial Expressions and Popular Rhymes of Scotland, published in 1896, quotes the following saying: "Ye hae skill 'o man and beast, ye was born between the Beltanes [sic]." Cheviot took the saying from a 1721 work by James Kelly and includes Kelly's footnote: "i.e., between the first and eighth of May." It should be appreciated here that the Celtic fire festivals, including Beltaine, survived in Scotland to the beginning of the 19th Century. There are, therefore, some Scottish references that were supported by personal observation, and Kelly's notes were founded on existing traditions, and so are of considerable significance, especially this one with regard to Helston's festival of May 8. It becomes doubly so when taken in association with the previous song and ceremonies, which were celebrated on May 1.

Since I have found no references to this extended span of Beltaine in modern sources, I assume that this old custom has not survived into recent times. This may explain its absence from Sir James G. Frazer's The Golden Bough.

Robin Hood and Little John,
They both are gone to the fair-o,
And we will go to the merry green wood,
To see what they do there-o,
And for to chase-o,
To chase the buck and doe.
Refrain: Hal-an-tow, jolly rumble-o,
For we are up as soon as any day-o,
And for to fetch the summer home,
The summer and the May-o,
For summer is a come-o,
And winter is a gone-o.

2. Where are those Spaniards,
That make so great a boast-o?
They shall eat the grey goose feather,
And we will eat the roast-o,
In every land-o,
The land where e'er we go.

As for St. George-o,
St. George was a knight-o,
Of all the knights in Christendom,
St. George he has the righto-o,
In every land-o,
The land where e'er we go.

4. But to a greater than St. George,
Our Helston has a right-o,
St. Michael with his wings outspread,
The Archangel so bright-o,
Who fought the fiend-o,
Of all mankind the foe!

5. God bless Aunt Mary Moses,
And all her power and might-o,
And send us peace in Merry England,
Both day and night-o,
And send us peace in Merry England,
Both now and evermore-o.

John Barleycorn

The next event, in the calendar of rituals, was the Summer Solstice, which was observed on the eve of June 22. Since its adoption by the Christian church, it has been moved to June 24 and has become the feast of St. John the Baptist. Like the Celtic fire festivals of Beltaine and Samhain, Midsummer was also a fire festival, but, as Charles Kightly notes in his Customs and Ceremonies of Britain, it was generally restricted to those areas of Britain that were settled by Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. Little appears to have survived of the ancient celebrations, although it is generally considered to be a worshipful time for Wiccans and other neo-pagans.

In the Celtic calendar, Lughnasadh, named for the Celtic sun god Lugh, was observed on August 1. The festival became known by its Anglo-Saxon name of Lammas and, following its adoption by the Christian church, is of course still observed. Lughnasadh was a festival of thanksgiving when wheat, of the first harvest, and bread made from the flour of the first wheat was given as an offering. It was also a time to ask for a bountiful, continuing harvest, and, as such, it has not changed its function. even today.

Of equal importance to the countryman, however, was the final harvesting of the corn, about the end of September. Because the harvest depended upon so many variables—manpower, acreage, and the weather, to name but a few—the harvest festival varied from village to village, and no specific time was set aside for an all-encompassing, ritual celebration. Consequently, the rituals were incorporated into the actual process of harvesting and were conducting as the final sheaves were cut.

These customs survived at least until machinery took over, but they varied considerably from place to place. Generally, however, the final stand of corn was cut by the harvesters throwing their sickles at the corn—very often to the cries of "the Neck, the Neck"—and, from the final corn, corn dollies, representing the capture of the corn spirit, were made. These, in turn, were either passed on to a farmer who had not finished his reaping or they were kept in the house to provide good luck until the following year. According to Frazer, shouts and cries, directed at the final stand of corn (or any grain crop, including rice) were common throughout Europe, Asia, and North America. In
Egypt, this led to the cult of Osiris, the resurrection god, and a similar, underlying belief, presumably existed among most farming communities.

A simple personification of the harvest cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is the song "John Barleycorn."

There were three men from Oxford came,
To plough for the wheat and rye,
They made a vow, and a solemn vow,
John Barleycorn must die.

Refrain: To me right-fol-lairy, fol-the-diddle-ay,
To me right-fol-lairy, oh,
To me right-fol-lairy, fol-the-diddle-ay,
To me right-fol-lairy, oh.

They ploughed him into the furrow, so deep,
And threw clods over his head,
And there he lay for some long time,
Till they thought that he was dead.

And there he lay for some long time,
Till the rain from the skies did fall,
Then Barleycorn popped up his head,
And did surprise them all.

Well, he grew up tall in the midsummer time,
When the weather was pleasant and warm,
And then he grew a long, long beard,
To prove he was a man.

Then they hired men with sickles,
To cut him off at the knee,
And how they used poor Barleycorn,
They used him barbarously.

Then they pricked him with their forks, so sharp,
And pierced him to the heart,
Then they tossed him in the air, so clear,
And tied him to a cart.
7. Then they hired men with thrashes,
Who laid him down, so low,
And they came smick-smack, on poor Jack's back,
Till the flesh bled every blow.

8. Then they put him into the malting kiln,
Thinking to dry his bones,
But, worse than that, poor Barleycorn,
He's ground between two stones.

9. Then they pushed him into a tub, so strong,
And kept him in the barn,
And there they made a mash of him,
Thinking 'twould do no harm.

10. Put your wine into your glasses,
Your cider in tin-cans,
Put Barleycorn in the old, brown jug,
For he proves the strongest man.

All Soul's Day
November 2

The two great festivals of the Celtic world were Beltaine and Samhain. Samhain was the eve of winter and the beginning of the Celtic New Year, when, because things were in flux, there was a rift in the fabric of the world. Through this rift, the souls of dead were able to pass to the world of the living. One way to appease the souls—and to prevent them from getting out of hand—was for the poor to go from house to house asking for soul-cakes.

With the passage of time, the requesting and offering of soul-cakes has largely degenerated into requests for "ale and strong beer," and, in Cheshire, where the pre-revival custom of souling was one of the longest to survive, other ancient customs—both mummers plays and the hobby horse—have become part of the festivities.

The original time for celebrating Samhain, according to the Julian calendar, was the eve of November 1st, but, since the festival was adopted by the Christian church, the rituals of souling have become diffused and take place variously through the first two weeks of November. Its pre-Christian uses of fire have, of course, been absorbed into the Guy Fawkes Night celebration of November 5th.

It is interesting to note that the Christian church already had two almost identical festivals—All Saints' and All Souls’—to superimpose over the Celtic festival and that the ancient Greek festival of Anthesteria was essentially based on the same beliefs in regard to the dead.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, this was also the beginning of The Season of the Revels, which was similar to the then current European—especially in Germany—Carnival, which was a time of disguising, masques, and masquerades.

Soul! Soul! for a soul-cake!
I pray you, good missus, for a soul-cake!
An apple, a pear, a plum or a cherry,
Or any good thing to make us all merry.
One for Peter, two for Paul,
Three for Them that made us all.

The Edgmont Men's Souling Song

There's two or three hearty lads standing hard by,
We are come a-souling, good nature to try,
We are come a-souling, as well doth appear,
And all that we soul for is ale and strong beer.

Refrain: For we're come a-souling, for the souling time's here,
And all that we soul for is ale and strong beer.
2. The streets they are gotten dark, dirty and cold,
   We are come a-souling, this night we'll make bold,
   We are come a-souling, as well doth appear,
   And all that we soul for is ale and strong beer.

3. Abroad in your meadows, alone in your streets,
   If this be a good house, we shall have some relief,
   If this be a good house, as well doth appear,
   And all that we soul for is ale and strong beer.

4. Look out for your cellar-key, your cellar-key, good dame,
   By walking and talking you shall get a good name,
   By walking and talking we've got very dry,
   So I hope my good Missis will not us deny.

5. Go down to your cellar, and there you shall find,
   Both ale, beer, and brandy, and the best of all wine,
   And when you are drawing, don't let your heart fail,
   But bring us one jug of your bonny brown ale.

6. I pray, my good missis, don't tarry to spin,
   But look for a jug to draw some drink in,
   And when we have got it, O then you shall see,
   And when we have drunk it, how merry we'll be.

7. Now we're come a-souling, it brings us good cheer,
   And when it is over, it's never the near!
   Returning you thanks for your ale and strong beer,
   And we'll come no more souling till this time next year.

Beliefs that associate the wren with good or bad luck are common and diverse in England. It was considered to be good luck if a farmer in Dorset found a wren’s nest in his hayrick, for instance, but, throughout Britain, it was generally believed that bad luck would attend anyone robbing a wren’s nest. The importance of the wren in folk culture can perhaps be gauged to a small degree by the variety of regional names given to it. In Cornwall the wren is known as wranny; in Dorset, cunny; and in Sussex, juggie. In Scotland it is known as Our Lady’s or Our Lady’s of Heaven’s...
Bird, and Pliny, writing of English Celtic beliefs in A.D. 77, referred to the wren as the King of the Birds. In Ireland, where Celtic beliefs have endured most completely, the wren is the Druid of the Birds.

Except for on St. Stephen’s Day, it was at all times considered unlucky to kill the wren. On St. Stephen’s Day, December 26, the wren was caught and killed and carried about from house to house in a decorated box, or at the junction of two hoops of willow or other flexible wood, or on a branch of fir, depending on the locale. Its feathers were given to householders and to fishermen as protective charms or good-luck amulets in exchange for food and drink—or coin!

Version

This Isle of Man version is followed by knocking on the door and, "Come on with the money, mister, or it’ll be ‘Bad House we’ll be singing!’"

We’ll hunt the wren, says Robin the bobbin,
We’ll hunt the wren, says Richie the robin,
We’ll hunt the wren, says Jack o’ the land,
We’ll hunt the wren, says everyone.

Where, oh where? says Robin the bobbin, &c.

3. In yonder green bush,
4. How get him down?
5. With sticks and stones,
6. How get him home?
7. The brewer’s big cart,
8. How’l we ate him?
9. With knives and forks,
10. Who’ll come to dinner?
11. The king and the queen,…
12. Eyes to the blind, says Robin the bobbin,
   Legs to the lame, says Richie the robin,
   Pluck to the poor, says Jack o’ the land,
   Bones to the dogs, says everyone.
13. The wren, the wren, is king of the birds,
   St. Stephen’s Day he’s caught in the furze.
   Although he is little, his family is great,
   We pray you, good people, to give us a trate.

Version II (The Cutty Wren)

It would take a small book to write out all of the versions of "Hunting the Wren." This second version is only one of a number of Welsh versions—quite apart from the versions from the north of England and the many from Ireland—but it is typical of the genre.

   O where are you going? says Milder to Malder,
   O I cannot tell you, says Festle to Fose.
   We’re going to the woods, says John the Red Nose.
   We’re going to the woods, says everyone.
2. O what will you do there?...
   We’ll shoot the Cutty Wren,

3. O how will you shoot her?
   With bows and arrows....

4. O that will not do,...
   With cannons and guns,

5. O how will you bring her home?
   On four strong men’s shoulders.,

6. O that will not do,...
   In waggons and carts,

7. O what will you cut her up with?
   With hatchets and cleavers....

8. O how will you boil her?
   In kettles and pots,...

9. O that will not do,
   In cauldrons,...

10. O who’ll have the spare ribs?
    We’ll give them to the poor,.

To conclude this essay, I would like to quote Trefor M Owen, Welsh Folk Customs. Owen was referring specifically to harvest festival customs, but his words are equally pertinent in a more general sense:

   In the course of many centuries, these customs [have] lost their ritual significance and [have] become merely an outlet for rejoicing and merriment natural to the occasion.

   They [do] not have to be understood to be enjoyed by those who [take] part in them; and the [are] enjoyed all the more for the hard work and anxiety which [has] preceded them.

Bibliography


Mike Ballantyne was born in England in 1943. He now divides his time between printmaking and studies and performance in folk music and folklore. A founding member and on the executive of the Cowichan Folk Guild/Islands Folk Festival, Mike is a singer of English traditional songs; his a cappella recording Pin Pot and Plough (1992) has received very favorable reviews in the folk press (Bulletin 26.3). Mike has recently been elected to the board of the CSMT. He lives in Cobble Hill, on Vancouver Island, with his wife and two cats.

Denis Donnelly of Victoria, another gift to Canada from Edinburgh, plays harp, lute, guitar, and keyboards and is a member of Victoria’s “Neo-Celtic Street Band” Rig-a-Jig. He transcribed the tunes for Mike’s essay, which first saw the light of day as a workshop.