

around the year

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SEASONS AND THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

MAY DAY

by Hamish Hendry

AN EXCERPT FROM *HOLIDAYS AND HAPPY-DAYS* (1901)

If there is one month in the year that is more joyful than another it is the month of May—the merry month of May. And it is not difficult to understand why it should be so. In Europe it is the month when nature out-of-doors awakens into life; when leaves appear upon the trees; when flowers in profusion peep from among the grass; when the little birds in lane and woodland sing their sweetest. Nature is joyously astir; and in the sunshine of the open sky all people, especially young people, find it good to be alive. That is the reason why May is the merry month. It is Nature's holiday time; the time when she calls upon all folk who are weary of winter and rough weather, to come out of their stuffy houses and enjoy themselves for a little in green places, under the blue tent of the sky.

It is the sun that brings all this new life and gladness as it goes higher in the heavens and shines brighter. So it happened that the ancient

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From the Editor's Desk

May 1, 2016

Dear Readers:

Welcome to the month of May! While the old adage, "April showers bring May flowers," might have been true in prior years, it's been quite dry here in New England. I've had very few opportunities to slip on my wellies and jump in puddles! Still, nature finds a way: The grass is greening, the new leaves are bursting forth from bare branches, and the birds are most definitely singing.

What better way to enjoy all of this beauty than with a flower-filled celebration? May Day on the 1st of the month has long been considered the beginning of summer in some parts of the world. You can read more about **May Day festivities** from the past starting on the first page of this newsletter.



The month of May is also associated with new life, and perhaps that is why the blessed virgin Mary is known as the "Queen of May" in the Roman Catholic tradition. As the mother of our Lord, she brings new life to all of us. I've put together some **ideas for honoring Mary** in her month (see page 6).

May also brings us **Pentecost** on the 15th of the month. An ancient Jewish festival commemorating the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, this special day is also observed by Christians to mark the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. In England, Pentecost is also called **Whitsunday** and traditions associated with it have an interesting history dating back to the Middle Ages (see page 5). We might think of this time period as the "dark ages" but a closer examination reveals a vibrant society that took many opportunities to gather as a community and celebrate throughout the year.

Don't forget to check out my book selections for the month (see page 7); if you're looking for additional inspiration you can find a comprehensive list of my favorite titles at AroundTheYear.org/books.

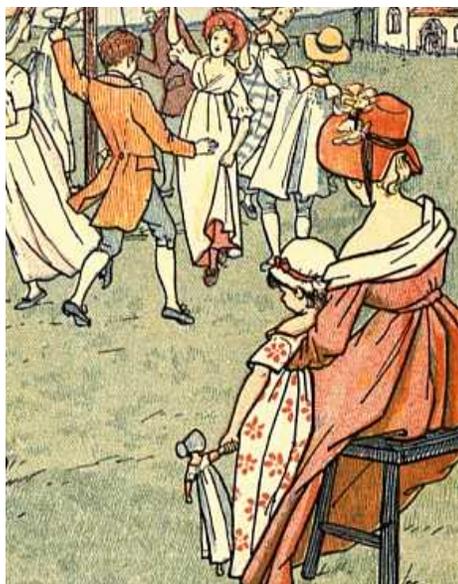
Kelli Ann Wilson, Editor

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Coming to *around the year* in June:
Summer Solstice, outdoor fun, & more!

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inhabitants of these islands, not knowing any better, held a great festival on the First of May to the praise and glory of the sun-god. A relic of this worship lingered until recently in the Beltane fires that were lit on the high hills of Scotland and Ireland. It was the same with the old Romans. They had a goddess of flowers called Flora, and about the beginning of May they held a festival in her honour. The houses were decked with garlands, there was much feasting and dancing out-of-doors, and at these feasts the goddess herself was represented by a beautiful maiden crowned with flowers.



There is reason to think that some of our May Day customs were derived from these ancient peoples. In any case, it has always been a joyful day in England, especially in the ancient times before the Puritans abolished May-poles and merry-making. Not only the citizens of London, but also the lords and ladies of the Court, used to go out to the woods around the city—it was a very much smaller city then—and gather hawthorn blossom. This they called going a-Maying, and the flower of the hawthorn came to be called May-blossom. It was brought into hamlet, town, and city with great rejoicing, and to the sound of music.

Then the whole day thereafter was spent in merry-making. In every town and village there was a tall pole fixed, called a May-pole; and on May Day this pole, the centre of all the frolic, was made gay with great garlands of flowers. Every town and village, also, had a Queen of the May, a maiden who was chosen for her beauty, and who sat apart crowned with flowers, an object of envy and admiration. The lads



and lassies sang carols, played at such games as kiss-in-the-ring, and danced the morris dance. Not many of these customs now remain; the May-poles have disappeared; and very few of you children, I suppose, go a-Maying. Do you not think that is a mistake? I do; the work-a-day world is not such a mirthful place that we can afford to forget the cheery old customs, and there are surely many worse ways of spending a day than in dancing round a May-pole. I am sure that you children would like to have the merry-making of May Day brought back again.

—H.H.

LILACS (*S. VULGARIS*)

The lilac is the official flower of my home state of New Hampshire, even though it is not native to North America. It is so popular around here that almost every yard in my neighborhood has a lilac bush growing in it. And, because they can grow from cuttings there's no telling where each plant originated. I have a mix of plantings from my grandmother's farm in northern New Hampshire and my brother's house just a few towns away. The soft purple-pink flowers smell heavenly when they're in bloom, and their scent will always be "home" to me. Because they are so long-lived, some stands may be more than two hundred years old! If you don't already have one, consider planting a lilac; they are hardy in zones 2-10.

MAY 2016





May Crown by Helen Connolly (1940)

All early in the morning
I rose to greet the day,
And underneath my window
I saw a Child at play.

The robins were not fearful
Of one so mild and meek;
They lighted on His shoulder
And nested at His cheek.

He picked the clustering roses,
The lily in its sheath,
The long-stemmed purple violets,
And wove them in a wreath.

And then I saw a Lady
Come walking in the dew;
Her robe was white as starshine,
Her mantle was deep blue.

And as the Child approached her,
All sweetly she knelt down
And bent her head, receiving
His fragrant, flowery crown.

May by Mary Oliver

May, and among the miles of leafing,
blossoms storm out of the darkness—
windflowers and moccasin flowers. The bees
dive into them and I too, to gather
their spiritual honey. Mute and meek, yet theirs
is the deepest certainty that this existence too—
this sense of well-being, the flourishing
of the physical body—rides
near the hub of the miracle that everything
is a part of, is as good
as a poem or a prayer, can also make
luminous any dark place on earth.

Some Quotes about May

"Never yet was a springtime, when the buds forgot to bloom."

—Margaret Elizabeth Sangster

"Everything is blooming most recklessly; if it were voices
instead of colors, there would be an unbelievable shrieking
into the heart of the night."

—Rainer Maria Rilke

"You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from
coming."

—Pablo Neruda

WHITSUNTIDE

by Robert Thomas Hampson

AN EXCERPT FROM *MEDII
AEVI KALENDARIUM* (1841)

The earliest day on which the moveable feast of Pentecost can occur is May 10; by us it is popularly called *Whitsuntide*, the *Dominica Alba* of the middle ages, because the catechumens, newly baptized, appeared from Easter to Whitsuntide in white garments; hence White Sunday, [Anglo-Sax. *pyipa Sonnan-dæg* —Teuton. *Weissentag*]. The author of a manuscript, "Tractatus de Virtutibus et Vitiis," gives a less probable reason for this appellation:—It is called in English *Wytesonday* (he says), because our ancestors were accustomed to give all the milk of their sheep and cows to the poor for the love of God, that they might become more pure and fit to receive the Holy Ghost. The author of the "Festival of Englishe Sermones" supplies a more spiritual etymology than either of the preceding. He says—"this day is called *Wytsunday*, by cause the holy ghost brought wytte and wysdom in to Cristis discyples, and so by her prechying after in to all cristendom."

The Whitsuntide holidays were celebrated by the different pastimes which exhilarated other festivals. In the ancient romance of *Syr Bevys of Hampton*, we find that the gentry amused themselves with horse-races.

The *Whitsun Ales* (holy ales, or church ales, called also *Easter ales*), and other customs formerly observed at Whitsun, are almost wholly obsolete. *Whitsun ales* from their being sometimes held on Easter Sunday and Whit-Sunday, or on some of the holidays that follow them, certainly originated, says Strutt, from the wakes.¹ Others, however, trace them to *αγάπα*, or love feasts of the early Christians; and, as to the word ale, Mr. Douce observes that much pains have been taken, for one cannot call it learning. The best opinion, however, seems to be that, from its use in composition, it means nothing more than a feast or merry-making, as in the words *Leet-ale, Lamb-ale, Whitsun-ale, Clerk-ale, Bread-ale, Church-ale, Scot-ale, Midsummer-ale, &c.* At all these feasts ale appears to have been the predominant liquor, and it is exceedingly probable that, from this circumstance, the metonymy arose. Dr. Hicke

informs us that the AngloSaxon *Geol*, the Dano-Saxon *Iol*, and the Icelandic *Ol*, respectively, have the same meaning; and perhaps Christmas was called by our northern ancestors Yule, or the feast, by way of pre-eminence. The churchwardens and parishofficers of olden times, unversed in etymologies, took ale to be a liquor, and were wont to lay in a large quantity of malt, which they brewed into strong ale, and sold it to the populace in holiday times, applying the money received on these occasions to the repair of the church, or to the relief of the poor.

Aubrey's description of a Whitsun-ale is, that "in every parish was a church-house, to which belonged spits, crooks, and other utensils for dressing provisions. Here the housekeepers met. The young people were there too, and had dancing, bowling, shooting at butts, &c. the ancients sitting gravely by and looking on."

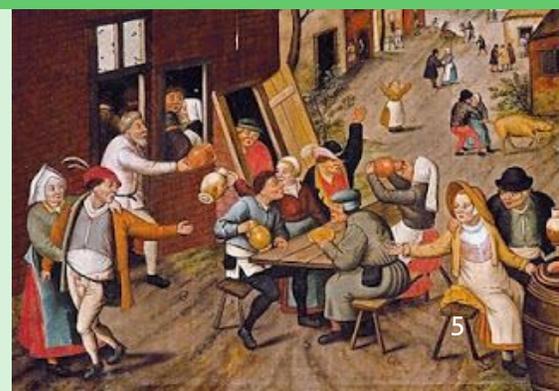
An arbour, called Robin Hood's Bower, was erected in the church-yard, and here maidens stood gathering contributions.

—R.T.H.

¹ Wakes were annual festivals to honor patron saints of parishes, and were often used as fundraisers.

MEDIEVAL BID-ALES

The word "bridal" originally derives from **bride-ale**, the wedding feast organized to raise money for the couple. The more general **bid-ale** was a benefit feast and all those attending were expected to make some contribution to help the object of the benefit, usually the poor or some other charitable cause. These parish festivals were of much ecclesiastical and social importance in medieval England. Source: *Wikipedia*





QUEEN OF MAY: CELEBRATING THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

In the Roman Catholic church, the month of May is devoted to a celebration of the blessed virgin Mary. For this reason she is sometimes called the Queen of May—she is given the title "queen" in Eastern Orthodox and Anglican faith traditions, as well. Traditionally associated with the birth of new life, May is a natural month to celebrate the mother of God.

There are many Roman Catholic traditions associated with Mary in the month of May, but perhaps none so beautiful as the "May Crowning," also popular in the Orthodox Church, in which an icon or statue of the Virgin Mary in the parish church receives ornamentation on May 1st. Garlands of flowers are a popular choice.

May Crowning can also be done by families at home. A crown is constructed of wire and children could add flowers and leaves to it. Once finished, the crown could be placed on the head of a Marian statue, or secured around an icon of Mary.

Children will also enjoy making flower crowns for themselves, a long-standing spring tradition and perfect for wearing to a May Day

celebration or gathering.

Another activity that can be done with children is the construction of a home May Altar. If you already have a designated altar area, the addition of flowers and imagery showing the Queenship of Mary would be a nice addition. This could also be done with a nature table.

If you don't have a home altar or nature table, May is the perfect time to set aside some sacred space in your home. Besides being aesthetically pleasing, home altars can be a place for prayer, reading Scripture, journaling, or enjoying daily devotionals. Even a tiny space can become sacred by its use.

For those that enjoy spending time outdoors, planting a Marian garden might be the perfect activity for the month of May. Dating to medieval times, the practice of dedicating a garden space to Mary was revived in the early twentieth century. A statue of Mary, alone or holding the baby Jesus, is central to the Marian garden.

Mary has long been associated with flowers, and has been linked to the phrase "I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys" from the Song of

Songs. More than 30 flowers and herbs are associated with Mary, including: Lilies of the valley, peonies, violets, irises, columbine, lavender, and marigolds.

Nurturing plants is a wonderful spiritual practice, and a Marian garden is a calm, serene place to engage in prayer and contemplation.

For a wealth of information about Mary visit www.udayton.edu/imri/mary

Image: *Coronation of the Virgin*, Velázquez

Bring Flowers the Fairest *a Victorian song for Mary*

Bring flow'rs of the fairest,
Bring flow'rs of the rarest,
From garden and woodland
And hillside and vale;
Our full hearts are swelling,
Our glad voices telling
The praise of the loveliest
Rose of the vale.

Refrain:

O Mary we crown thee with blossoms today!
Queen of the Angels and Queen of the May.
O Mary we crown thee with blossoms today,
Queen of the Angels and Queen of the May.

MAY 2016

(A) Anglican; (RC) Roman Catholic

May 1st: Sixth Sunday after Easter
(May Day)

May 2nd to 4th: Rogation Days

May 3rd: Feast of Sts. James and Phillip, apostles.

May 8th: ASCENSION DAY

May 8th (A) or 13th (RC): St. Julian of Norwich, mystic.

May 14th: Feast of St. Matthias, apostle, patron of carpenters and tailors.

May 15th: PENTECOST or **WHITSUNDAY**

May 22nd: TRINITY SUNDAY

May 26th (A) or 27th (RC): Feast of St. Augustine of Canterbury, apostle to the English.

May 29th: Second Sunday after Pentecost

May 30th: Feast of St. Joan d'Arc, patroness of France, martyrs, and soldiers.

May 31st: VISITATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

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I'm currently looking for individuals who might be interested in contributing to *around the year* (both the website and the newsletters). If you enjoy what I've created and would like to become involved, please contact me! kelli@aroundtheyear.org

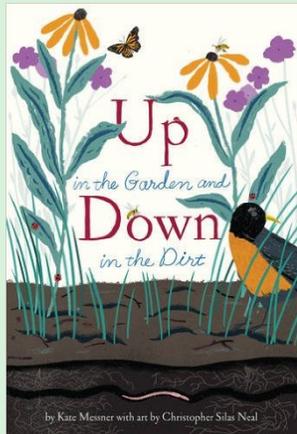


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Recommended Reading

CHILDREN'S BOOKS FOR THE MONTH OF MAY



Up in the Garden and Down in the Dirt, written by Kate Messner, and illustrated by Christopher Silas Neal

From the publisher:

In this exuberant and lyrical follow-up to the award-winning *Over and Under the Snow*, discover the wonders that lie hidden between stalks, under the shade of leaves . . . and down in the dirt. Explore the hidden world and many lives of a garden through the course of a year! Up in the garden, the

world is full of green—leaves and sprouts, growing vegetables, ripening fruit. But down in the dirt exists a busy world—earthworms dig, snakes hunt, skunks burrow—populated by all the animals that make a garden their home.

Mama Built a Little Nest, written by Jennifer Ward, and illustrated by Steve Jenkins

From the publisher:

A delightful exploration of the incredible variety of nests birds build for their babies, illustrated by a Caldecott Honoree.

There are so many different kinds of birds—and those birds build so many different kinds of nests to keep their babies cozy. With playful, bouncy rhyme, Jennifer Ward explores nests large and small, silky and cottony, muddy and twiggy—and all the birds that call them home!

