

**The Rituals surrounding *Calan Mai* – the Welsh May Day – and their Functions**  
**by**  
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Once known in Welsh as *Calan Haf*, ‘the calend of summer’, the first day of May later transmuted into *Calan Mai* and was the half-yearly counterpart to *Calan Gaeaf*, the first of November. Just as the latter heralded the formal beginning of winter, so *Calan Mai* was considered to be the formal beginning of summer, when the annual rejuvenation of plant life was well advanced.<sup>i</sup> As one half of the year transformed to the next, supernatural powers were abroad, therefore it was a time for taking great care as well as for celebrating the coming of summer.<sup>ii</sup>

This essay aims to examine the rituals associated with the Welsh May Day in all its parts, beginning with the customs of May Eve and the traditions of carol singing which commenced on May morning, before considering the rituals of May Day in south Wales and of Maypole customs more generally, then concluding with the unique and colourful Cadi Ha tradition of north Wales. The meanings and functions of these rituals will be considered throughout the text as individual traditions are examined, but will also be brought together in a final section and scrutinised in more detail, with appropriate conclusions drawn.

### **May Eve**

The May Day festival actually began on the evening of May Eve, or *Nos Galan Mai*, one of three ‘spirit nights’ (*ysbrydnos*) – the other two being St John’s Eve and Hallowe’en – when it was believed that the veil between this world and the next, namely the otherworld, was opened and the spirits of the dead were free to roam abroad among the living.<sup>iii</sup>

According to Marie Trevelyan writing in 1909, May Eve was often the time when the ‘Beltane fires’ were lit, but alternatively on the first, second or third of May. Using this ancient Celtic name for the festival, she asserts that these fires were last lit in the Vale of Glamorgan in the 1830s, at Newton Nottage (Porthcawl), Cowbridge, and Llantwit Major,<sup>iv</sup> and indeed, it appears that the lighting of bonfires at this time was more prevalent in south Wales than in the north.<sup>v</sup> One of Trevelyan’s informants

who recalled the fires around the turn of the century was able to give a full account of quite an involved ritual, as follows:-

Nine men had to first divest themselves of any money or metals before foraging for sticks from nine different trees in their local woods. These were then carried to a chosen spot where an audience had gathered, and a circle was cut on the ground and the sticks laid in crosswise fashion. A fire was kindled by the traditional method of producing friction between two oak rods, applying this to the sticks and building up a large bonfire, or *coelcerth*. Sometimes two bonfires would be set up close together. Next two cakes, one made of oatmeal and the other of brown meal, were each divided into four portions and deposited in a small flour-bag, and the participants would each pick out a piece. Those with the brown-meal portions were obliged to jump three times over the flames or run three times between the two fires, with much screaming and shouting in the process. A calf or sheep would once occasionally have been thrown in the fire if there was any disease among either herd or flock; alternatively, cattle would be driven between the fires for cleansing purposes. At a later stage, this was commuted to driving the animals over the ashes as a protection against various diseases. Partly burnt logs were saved to light the following year's Beltane fire, but it was considered unlucky to start a midsummer bonfire from the remains of a May one. Ashes and charred logs were also taken home as a protection against illness; wearing a few ashes in one's shoes protected a person from any great sadness or distress. Trevelyan is in no doubt but that the purpose of this fire festival was one of purification and healing, and most commentators are generally in agreement.<sup>vi</sup>

Ronald Hutton in his comprehensive history of the ritual year in Britain points out the closeness of Marie Trevelyan's account of the May Day fires in Glamorgan to Highland accounts of Beltane; yet the only other recorded *Welsh* example is at Trefedryd in Montgomeryshire, where the custom continued throughout the 19th century.<sup>vii</sup> Whilst 'the pattern of distribution does look a little puzzling', it seems a reasonable assumption that these isolated Welsh examples alongside the comparable Scottish examples as well as survivals in Cumbria and south-west England, indicate a once widespread tradition over all the 'Celtic' areas.<sup>viii</sup>

Another May Eve tradition which survived in Anglesey and Caernarvonshire until the mid-19th century was that of *gware gŵr gwellt*, or 'playing a straw man', whereby a young man, having lost his girlfriend to another, would make a man of straw and leave it somewhere close to where the girl lived. This straw man represented the new

rival and would have had a letter – presumably a not very complimentary one – attached to it. Unsurprisingly, the situation often led to a fight between the two men at the May Fair.<sup>ix</sup>

Witches were seen as mischievously active on May Eve: they would hold their revels during the day and dance with the devil at crossroads at midnight; one sure way of ensuring that they could do no harm was to ring the church bells. Other protective measures included drawing crosses in chalk on every door as a protection against witches entering the property;<sup>x</sup> in Monmouthshire the crosses were fashioned from twigs.<sup>xi</sup> William Howells writing in 1831 informs us that in Carmarthenshire protection took the form of placing branches of mountain ash (Welsh *cerdyn*) over the doors of houses.<sup>xii</sup> Some informants in Kidwelly said more generally that it helped keep trouble out of the house; while a younger informant referred to not only mountain ash but holly being used as well, as the witches were afraid of the latter pricking them.<sup>xiii</sup> In old Monmouthshire it was hawthorn and birch, in addition to mountain ash, that were hung round porches and windows.<sup>xiv</sup> Equally, if there were any witches in the church congregation(!), they could soon be detected by anyone wearing ivy on their hat or any part of their clothing.<sup>xv</sup>

## May Carols

*Calan Mai* proper commenced in most areas with the morning visit by a group singing May carols outside the houses of the neighbourhood; this then often continued for the whole of the month.<sup>xvi</sup> May carols were known variously as *carolau Mai*, *carolau haf* ('summer carols'), *canu haf* ('summer singing'), or sometimes even *canu dan y pared* ('singing under the wall').<sup>xvii</sup> The earliest May carols appear in manuscript form but from the 18th century they begin to appear in almanacs and ballad leaflets.<sup>xviii</sup> The custom reached its apogee in the 17th and 18th centuries,<sup>xix</sup> but by the 17th century – and probably long before – a strong religious component had entered what had originally been a secular seasonal festival.<sup>xx</sup> Phyllis Kinney points to some evidence of musical accompaniment, with the carol 'Mwynen Mai' ('Fairest May') being noted in a fiddle manuscript, and another May carol containing a direction to be sung by two men and two boys with harp and fiddle.<sup>xxi</sup> Indeed, whilst dancing is not specifically referred to in these carols, Rhiannon Ifans points to circumstantial evidence that dancing, including Morris dancing, was quite common in

Wales and was no doubt present on these occasions.<sup>xxii</sup> The dancers wore costumes and carried staffs to frighten off the evil spirits whilst awakening the natural world.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The aim of these house-to-house visits was quite clearly to bring good luck to each of the families visited, to wish them a fruitful summer after the hardships of winter, and to thank the Lord in anticipation of the coming season of abundance.<sup>xxiv</sup> Behind this may have lain a belief that the energies created by lively song and dance could in turn stimulate the earth's energies, enabling the crops to ripen as well as animals to breed.<sup>xxv</sup> Emma Lile in *Troed yn Ôl a Throed Ymlaen* goes further and makes a direct link between the May Day festivities and the ancient Roman festival of Floralia.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The unknown poet who wrote the song 'Calanmai' no later than 1610 attempted to capture this note of human joy and sexual liberation by locating them in the context of the rotation of the seasons; and hopes for a good harvest were to some extent blamed for the promiscuous behaviour of young people at this time.<sup>xxvii</sup> We may be certain that sexual coupling will be the fruit of the anticipated meeting between the bard and his sweetheart in the poem, a coupling which reflected the warmth and passions of early summer.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The most prolific carol writer was the poet Huw Morus or Morys (1622-1709) of Llansilin, Denbighshire, and the counties where the *canu dan bared* tradition survived longest were the two with which he was most closely associated: Denbigh and Montgomery. The Rhys family was also noted for writing carols with a local applicability to Llanbrynmair, Montgomeryshire, which they would then sing on their visits to various houses in the parish on May morning. But most May carols were in fact composed by Christian ministers, who aimed at introducing a more serious tone in order to restrain what they saw as the more flippant aspects of the May Day traditions.<sup>xxix</sup>

Seven Welsh summer carols were edited and translated, with accompanying music and dual texts, by T. Gwynn Jones and W.S. Gwynn Williams for a small volume in 1944, to meet a revival in interest at the time.<sup>xxx</sup> The religious nature of these carols can be seen in the provision of suggested readings from the Scriptures to accompany them.<sup>xxxi</sup> The themes throughout are fairly consistent in welcoming the summer and the growing fertility of the fields, whilst also singing praises to the Lord for his bounty and many blessings.

On more than one occasion May is referred to as a ‘wizard’ for working his green magic, and offering something of a contrast with the modern (and ancient) tendency to associate feminine, goddess-like attributes with the land:

Daw dewin y Mai heb ei weled, fin nos,  
Gan wasgar ei liwiau ar weirglodd a rhos;  
Bydd heulwen y bore yn dawnsio ar dwyn,  
A daw ar adenydd lawenydd i lwyn...

*The wizard of May is out riding unseen,  
He captures the land with a network of green;  
Soft waves of bright sunlight sweep over the leas,  
And summer-time song-birds make merry the trees...*

(from ‘Mwynder Mai / Sweetness of May’) <sup>xxxii</sup>

Another very popular carol, ‘Mae’r Ddaear yn Glasu / The Earth is Reviving’, written by John Howel of Llandovery (1774-1830), is another example of a May carol which emphasises summer’s reviving effects on the landscape:

Mae’r ddaer yn glasu,  
A’r coed sydd yn tyfu,  
A gwyrddion yw’r gerddi,  
Mae’r llwyni mor llon;  
A heirdd yw’r eginau,  
A’r dail ar y dolau,  
A blodau’r perllonau  
Pur llawnion...

*The earth is reviving,  
The woodlands are thriving,  
The land is a glory  
Of colour once more;  
With laurel and lily  
And daffadowndilly,  
The gardens are visions  
Of beauty...* <sup>xxxiii</sup>

Most May carols included a prayer for the monarchy, such as Dafydd Jones’ in 1733, which asked God to bless George II and the royal family. <sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **May Day Rituals (South Wales)**

Some traditions of ‘maying’ akin to their English counterparts were observed in various parts of Wales. <sup>xxxv</sup> In Tenby, Pembrokeshire, for instance, residents would on May Eve bedeck their windows with hawthorn boughs intertwined with other flowers;

though it was considered very unlucky to bring hawthorn into the house.<sup>xxxvi</sup> But elsewhere decking homes with greenery was more often than not carried out on May Day morning itself, such as in Montgomeryshire, where hawthorn flowers were strewn round the outside walls of houses after the flowers had been gathered early in the morning.<sup>xxxvii</sup> By contrast, birch and mountain ash twigs were gathered in Radnorshire.<sup>xxxviii</sup> But it was only on 12 May, Old May Eve, that a hawthorn tree obtained from a neighbouring parish was planted beside the front door in the Pendine district of Carmarthenshire.<sup>xxxix</sup>

An older custom which survived till the 1860s involved the young men of a parish decorating large bouquets of rosemary with white ribbons and setting them at the bedroom windows of maidens they admired. Conversely, disapproval of someone in the community was signified by attaching a horse's head to their door;<sup>xl</sup> or effigies might be carried round of anyone deserving of laughter or derision.<sup>xli</sup>

Another most remarkable older tradition in south Wales was a mock battle between two individuals representing Winter and Summer. 'Winter' and his party carried a blackthorn stick and his party wore fur clothing decorated with white wool, representing snow. A rival group was led by 'Summer', who carried a willow wand dressed with spring flowers and tied with ribbons; these likewise adorned his white smock. They all marched to a common or waste land, where a mock encounter took place along with a great deal of tomfoolery, but eventually Summer gained the upper hand. The victorious side selected a May King while the villagers chose a May Queen, and both were duly crowned. The rest of the day was given over to revelry of all kinds – feasting, dancing and games – and was rounded off with drinking overnight and into the next morning.<sup>xlii</sup>

*Calan Mai* was also more often than not the day on which the *twmpath chwarae* – literally, 'mound for playing' – was opened on village greens in eastern Montgomeryshire, though the sports and customs associated with the tradition then carried on throughout the summer months.<sup>xliii</sup> These opening ceremonies were carried out to great acclaim, and a detailed account of the tradition as practised in the parish of Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain in Powys until the mid-19th century has survived. Dancing was the principal pastime together with various sports, but by the time T. G. Jones was writing in the 1870s these pastimes had become but a memory. The Twmpath or village green was usually located on the brow of a hill, where the ground had been levelled off and a small mound of earth raised up in the middle to

accommodate the harpist or fiddler. Often oak branches would adorn the mound, and the dancers would need to circle musician, mound and branch. Whilst dancing to the harp would be taking place in one location, in another competitors partook of tennis, bowling, wrestling, or other sports. In this particular parish there were no less than four mounds or village greens.<sup>xliv</sup>

Roy Palmer points to a lesser-known account in William Hone's *Every-Day Book* for 1827 of a procession in Chepstow of milkmaids dancing round an old man with a wreath of wild flowers round his head, a staff with cowslips and bluebells in his hand, and a cow's horn round his shoulders, which he proceeded to blow as the party arrived at a house. 'An apple-cheeked dame with a low-crowned, broad-brim hat' carried a pot of cream and basket of strawberries, which she dispensed to townsfolk who came up with saucers or basins. These were accompanied by six goats decked out in flowers and carrying dairy utensils, whilst a farmer rode on a bull, also bedecked with greenery. Over thirty young people wearing wild flowers made up the rest of the party.<sup>xlv</sup> The whole thing must have presented a curious but delightful rustic sight.

### Maypole Customs

There appear to have been two key traditions associated with the maypole, one in north Wales associated in particular with Flintshire and Denbighshire, and another in south Wales. But in Glamorgan the May Day version seems to have taken second place to that of the 'summer birch', *y fedwen haf*, which was erected in midsummer on the feast of St John.<sup>xlvi</sup>

We can be sure of the existence of the maypole in Wales as early as the first half of the 14th century through allusions in a *cywydd* by Gruffudd ab Adda ap Dafydd (*fl.* 1340-70) to a birch tree felled and conveyed to Llanidloes in Montgomeryshire: the poet laments its fate, contrasting its new home near a pillory with the wood where it once grew:<sup>xlvii</sup>

Cyd bo da dy wyddfa dawn,  
Tref Idloes, tyrfa oedlawn,  
Nid da fy medwen genny'  
Na'th lathlud, na'th dud, na'th dŷ...

Pand anghyenen fedwen fu,  
Peri draw dy wywaw di

Pawl oer gar llaw'r pilori?

*Though your moot-hill, Idloes, make brave show,  
Where your busy crowds drift to and fro,  
To see my birch in such ill state  
Your town and your folk and their foray I hate...*

*And churlish was it, birch, to bear  
Your form, fast withering, hence to be  
A bare pole by the pillory!<sup>xlviii</sup>*

However, it is not until the 17th century that we learn anything further about maypole traditions – specifically, in terms of maypole-dancing to the tune of the pipes in north-east Wales, possibly owing to its spread across the English border.<sup>xlix</sup> In south Wales the tradition was known as *codi'r fedwen* or ‘raising the birch’, whilst in the north it was called *y gangen haf*, ‘the summer birch’.<sup>1</sup> Whilst many traditions of the agricultural year were in the process of being eclipsed by the Industrial Revolution,<sup>li</sup> William Roberts (Nefydd), writing in the mid-19th century, informs us that *dawnsio haf*, or summer dancing, was, alongside *dawns y fedwen*, ‘the dance of the birch’ (a form of Morris dancing) still very popular throughout Wales.<sup>lii</sup> Despite the varied terminology, however, the maypole customs of south Wales did not differ markedly from those in England.<sup>liii</sup> Roberts describes how in the south Wales tradition the maypole was painted in multi-colours, festooned with each dancer’s circle of ribbon in turn, then the pole having been raised into position, the dancers each took their places round it according to where they had placed their ribbons.<sup>liv</sup>

A varied form of the same tradition prevailed in Tenby, where young people would ‘thread the needle’ whilst dancing round various decorated maypoles in the town. This would involve between fifty and a hundred winding their way from one pole to another, and as each group met another coming from the opposite direction, they would form a chain and then pass on their respective ways.<sup>lv</sup> Rival groups endeavoured to pull down each others’ poles, and parents were often stationed as guards to keep watch over their respective territories.<sup>lvi</sup> William Thomas (1717-95), the diarist from St Fagans just outside Cardiff, confirms this practice of stealing the rival village’s pole; if stolen, no second maypole would be permissible and villagers would have to wait until next year’s celebrations.<sup>lvii</sup>

Emma Lile suggests that the maypole was a potent ‘ancient fertility symbol’ at the beginning of summer, and the wood of the birch was thought to possess magical, protective powers.<sup>lviii</sup> Ifans emphasises that raising a maypole in the middle of the

town was seen as a fairly explicit phallic symbol, indicating to the inhabitants that they were free to indulge in sexual relations at this time.<sup>lix</sup> Hutton is very sceptical about these claims, popular since the time of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Hutton makes a strong case for saying that had they been so, they would have been carved to appear more so, but in fact they were almost always covered by various layers of decoration, as we have seen. It is much more likely that maypoles were simply symbolic of the return of the season of vegetation and warm weather, a focal point for garlands and other adornments.<sup>lx</sup>

This does not diminish the ambience of freer sexual relations which once accompanied the *Calan Mai* celebrations. In view of what we have observed of the May carols, it is perhaps surprising that some of them coax the youth of their day to manifest the same warm feelings to each other as they do in the warmth of the sun.<sup>lxi</sup> However, the fulminations of Elizabethan Puritans such as Phillip Stubbes in his *The Anatomie of Abuses*<sup>lxii</sup> are hardly the testimony of an objective observer, and even his assertion about the youth resorting to the woods in droves overnight at May Eve are based on hearsay: “I have heard it credibly reported...”<sup>lxiii</sup> Given his views about the sinfulness of the theatre, dancing, markets, and even fashion, it is reasonable to suppose that he and his fellow Puritans vastly exaggerated the promiscuity attached to the day. Hutton points out that, whilst the activities of young people around May Day had become ‘a cliché of scandal and titillation’, in fact research by demographic historians has shown that there was in fact no increase in the number of pregnancies during this season, unlike the upswing later on in summer, when the weather was warmer!<sup>lxiv</sup>

### **The Cadi Ha (North Wales) i) General**

The north Wales ‘maypole’ tradition – if it can in this case be called a maypole – differed considerably from its southern counterpart and evolved its own distinctive features. It had several characteristics of the ‘visiting’ tradition and has been compared to the *Mari Lwyd*.<sup>lxv</sup> Between twelve and twenty young men would go May-dancing (*dawnsio haf*) to the accompaniment of a *crwth* or archaic Welsh harp, a fiddle, or sometimes both, played by one or two men.<sup>lxvi</sup> They would be dressed in white with multi-coloured ribbons, their faces would often be blackened, and they

would wave white handkerchiefs or flowering branches. Some would frequently be dressed as women.<sup>lxvii</sup>

The dancers were accompanied by two members of the group known as the Cadi and the Fool, who was often known as ‘Bili Ffwl’.<sup>lxviii</sup> He resembled *Pwnsh* and *Siwan* – or Punch and Judy – in the Mari Lwyd tradition, and it was his job to perform tomfoolery and generally create as much merriment as possible.<sup>lxix</sup> In early 20th-century Holywell the Cadi was dressed completely as a woman, but with a blackened face and wielding a broomstick.<sup>lxx</sup> One of the dancers carried the *cangen haf*, or ‘summer branch’, beautifully constructed and decorated with silver ornaments and watches.<sup>lxxi</sup> As folklorist Christina Hole points out, unlike most other May Day garlands around Britain, the Cadi Ha version does not appear to have been decorated with flowers, leaves or ribbons, but the silver ornaments would have made ‘a very splendid summer-emblem’, especially on a sunlit morning.<sup>lxxii</sup>

The tradition was particularly popular among colliery workers of Flintshire, and most likely related to the morris dances of Lancashire and Cheshire.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Song and dance would be combined in the Cadi Ha perambulations,<sup>lxxiv</sup> and Phyllis Kinney points out that, in complete contrast to the devotional character of the carols, the *dawnsio haf* was ‘unashamedly secular’.<sup>lxxv</sup> A version of the Cadi Ha song was collected from the singing of the master of the Holywell workhouse by Ruth Herbert Lewis:

Hwp, ha wen!  
Cadi ha, Morus stowt,  
Dros yr ychle’n neidio;  
Hwp, dena fo!  
A chynffon buwch a chynffon llo,  
A chynffon Richard Parri fo;  
Hwp, dena fo!

*Hoop, ha wen!*  
*Cadi ha, Morus stout,*  
*For the highest leaping;*  
*Hoop, that will do!*  
*And tail of cow and tail of calf,*  
*The blacksmith Richard Parry’s too;*  
*Hoop, that will do!*<sup>lxxvi</sup>

Lady Herbert Lewis reported seeing dancers in Mold jumping as high as they could whilst singing the Cadi Ha, with the purpose of awakening the earth and scaring off evil spirits. The reference to the cow and calf (*buwch a llo*) in some of these songs may indicate that blessing the animals was also part of the festivities;<sup>lxxvii</sup> but it could

equally well be a nonsense rhyme of the sort that often accompanies these kinds of merrymaking.

Another, similar, version of the text has been collected, this time focusing on the ladle carried by the Cadi;<sup>lxxviii</sup> it was recorded from the singing of Isaac Owen Jones, Llanasa, Flintshire, in 1966:

Ladal-i a ladal-o  
A ladal gawsom fenthyg!...<sup>lxxix</sup>

*Ladle-i and ladle-o*  
*A ladle we had to borrow!...*

Like so many traditions, the Cadi Ha faded after World War I, but has been revived since the late 1990s and has now become an annual event in Holywell.<sup>lxxx</sup>

### **The Cadi Ha ii) Specific Accounts**

A more detailed account of the custom is supplied by H.T.B., a contributor to William Hone's *Every-Day Book* in 1825: although he omits to specify the location, we may assume from the details provided that the area alluded to is the same as the one Roberts refers to: Denbighshire and Flintshire.<sup>lxxxi</sup> H.T.B. refers to the participants as belonging to 'the labouring classes', by which he seems to imply mainly *farm* labourers. A week or more before the festival the male participants' new white linen shirts are decorated by their sweethearts with bows and ribbons, presenting a colourful appearance.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

A youth chosen as garland-bearer together with another dancer better known for his sobriety call from house to house around the parish begging for the loan of watches, silver spoons or any other bright objects, to which they normally receive a favourable response.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The garland is constructed by attaching a triangular or square frame to one end of a pole or long staff; the frame is then covered with white linen and decorated with the silver spoons, placed in the shapes of stars, squares and circles. Between these are rows of watches, while the largest and most expensive ornament borrowed, usually a silver cup or tankard, crowns the top of the frame. The decorated garland is left over May Eve as a mark of respect at either the most liberal farmhouse in terms of its loan of silver, or with a farmer known locally as a good master.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

On May morning the dancers assemble at the village tavern and the procession sets out to the accompaniment of the church bells. The company are led by the Cadi, who

acts as ‘chief marshal, orator, buffoon, and money collector’.<sup>lxxxv</sup> He is always dressed, or one might say cross-dressed, in comic fashion, with a coat and waistcoat for his top half, and petticoats for his lower half; while his face is either covered by a grotesque mask or completely blackened over. His lips, cheeks and the orbits round his eyes are often painted red. Unlike Roberts’ account, there is no mention here of the Fool, but it is quite clear that in this case the Cadi fills the role more than adequately.

The rest of the party including the garland-bearer usually numbers thirteen: they are dressed in black velveteen breeches, white beribboned shirts, rosettes and streamers on their hats, and a white handkerchief in each dancer’s right hand.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

The Cadi is followed in the slow-moving procession by the garland-bearer and then the fiddler, the rest of the party following on in pairs or sometimes in single file. He

varies his station, hovers about his party, brandishes a ladle, and assails every passenger with comic eloquence and ludicrous persecution, for a customary and expected donation.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

Arriving at a farmhouse the garland-bearer takes up his position, while the dancers perform a quick-step to a well-known tune played by the violinist, throwing up their white handkerchiefs with a shout at each turn of the music. The Cadi meanwhile continues his buffoonery without respite, seeking contributions from the householders, and bowing and curtsying when he receives them. Then moving off to the next farmhouse, the retinue does not confine itself to its own parish but visits others in the area as well as any country town. The village bells finally announce their return in the evening, and the money collected, after defraying expenses, is spent in festive jollity. Even in the 1820s, the author H.T.B. expressed regret that this tradition was in decline.<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

Another Flintshire account for 1823 by a writer calling himself ‘Callestrwr’ refers to the *cangen*/branch carried by the company as ‘similar to the Merioneth straw-fork, or the letter Y’.<sup>lxxxix</sup> The Fool here is referred to as *ynfyd-ddyn* (literally, ‘foolish man’) or *ffwl*. He is dressed in an assortment of clothes from tattered to fine, with a huge veil full of holes over his blackened face, feathers in his hat, and a wooden sword in his hand. The Cadi in this case carries both a besom and a ladle. Upon receiving gifts at any house visited, the Fool and Cadi break into a holler and jump before handing over the takings to the treasurer or *cangen-wr*, ‘branch-man’. The perambulations last for three or four days.<sup>xc</sup>

Despite the two accounts being contemporaneous, one significant difference is that H.T.B. does not refer at all to the Fool, whereas in Callestrwr's account he is obviously of some significance. The latter argues that the roles of the Fool and Cadi gave them a licence to go about prying and purloining, something denied to the rest of the company.<sup>xcv</sup>

We can certainly conclude that if the Cadi Ha had originated or been influenced by Morris traditions from adjoining English counties, it had by this time shed most of these traces and become wholly Welsh.<sup>xcvi</sup>

### **Meanings and Functions**

Two sets of rituals emerge as the key components of the Welsh May Day. One comprises themes of rejuvenation and reproduction: a celebration of the new growth of the natural world mirrored in the fertility of both humans and animals. However, the omnipresence of supernatural powers at May Eve, one of the two fulcrums of the year when the veil between the living and the dead was opened, necessitated in complete contrast a series of protective and defensive rituals.<sup>xcvii</sup>

The Beltane fires in particular were considered to be a protection against infectious diseases, both in cattle and humans, at the beginning of May and the opening of the summer pastures.<sup>xcviii</sup> The ritual use of fire was one of the most potent weapons in use against the forces of evil active at this turning-point of the year:<sup>xcix</sup> it had a cleansing and purifying effect;<sup>xc</sup> and fire was at its most sacred when 'primitive' methods were used to kindle it, i.e. friction between sticks of wood.<sup>xcvi</sup> Other protective measures were taken against bad magic or witchcraft, by placing rowan, primroses, birch or hawthorn above doorways.<sup>xcviii</sup>

But equally valid is Trefor Owen's assertion that the external decoration of houses with greenery was as much about the other key theme, rejuvenation: a celebration of the arrival of summer and the renewal of the natural world,<sup>xcix</sup> and sports and games on the *twmpath chwarae* formed one part of this. Maypoles in south Wales, colourfully painted and adorned with dancers' ribbons, were quite clearly another important component of these celebratory traditions. Likewise, the Cadi Ha tradition of north Wales represents an example *par excellence* of the jollity associated with the onset of summer, with its garlands, good-luck visiting, singing, dancing, horseplay, cross-dressing, and general spectacle. The May carols also stand broadly within this

tradition, forming part of the house-to-house good luck visits, though there were inner tensions within the genre as Christian ministers sought to transmute the fertility themes in the more secular carols into praise to the Lord for his many bounteous blessings.

However, Owen's conjecture that the tradition may have originated in the worship of the Earth Goddess<sup>c</sup> represents a lingering example of the unprovable origin claims (to which Owen is not normally prone) put forward by past folklorists, who tried to link disparate time-periods separated by seemingly unbridgeable gulfs. Similarly, Emma Lile's contention of a direct link between Welsh May traditions, music and dance, and the ancient Floralia<sup>ci</sup> is totally unproven; such evidence as is readily available seems to be lacking for these claims and, if anything, tends to the opposite view. This is not to deny that the celebrations round May Day have remained remarkably consistent and retained several key features over many centuries, simply that one does not require recourse to ancient festivals to understand them. Perhaps a more readily applicable idea is that of the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung's theory of 'archetypes': which would imply, not so much that the May traditions are *derived* from the ancient festivals, but rather that the 'archetypal' imagery surrounding them crop up again and again in varying contexts, in different places, over many centuries.<sup>cii</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper reviewing the rituals associated with May Day in Wales has attempted to show that protective rituals against intense supernatural activity on May Eve gave way on May Day to celebratory rituals welcoming in the summer, and, in the case of carols, becoming a vehicle for Christian praise. Games and sports, music and dance expanded on this theme of rejuvenation, as did the colourful and distinctive Cadi Ha tradition in north Wales and the boisterous activities associated with maypoles generally at a time of year associated with freer sexual activity. But we have also endeavoured to show that, whilst many of the Welsh rituals may share themes in common with the rest of Britain as well as the continent, attempts to link their origins with ancient festivals across Europe are unprovable and unnecessary: the Welsh traditions are more than strong enough to stand on their own two feet.

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- iii Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 97.
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- xxiv Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, p. 100; Kinney, *Welsh Traditional Music*, p. 98.
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