

An Bhliain Cheilteach – The Celtic Year

na séasúir = the seasons

- an gheimhreadh: Nollaig, Eanáir, Feabhra
- an t-earrach: Márta, Aibreán, Bealtaine
- an samhradh: Meitheamh, Iúil, Lúnasa
- an fómhar: Meán Fómhair, Deireadh Fómhair, Samhain

Lá Bealtaine

- Lá Bealtaine, May Day (itself)
- Oíche Bhealtaine, eve of May Day
- crann Bealtaine, Maypole, lit. “tree of May”
- a bheith idir dhá thine Bhealtaine, to be between two May Day fires, which is basically the same as being between a “cloch” and an “áit chrua”¹

Its name appears to derive from the Old Irish words *Bel taine* meaning ‘bright fire’ and it was surrounded by a large number of folk beliefs some of which had possible pagan origins. As the name of the festival suggests bonfires ²played an important part in the activities and were often lit on prominent local landmarks with the Hill of Uisneach in Co. Westmeath being the most famous example. A particularly common tradition involved driving herds of cows between two bonfires in the belief that this would purify the herd and also bring luck.³

Mary Wrafter Heraty wrote “Tine Cnámh, as Gaeilge, fire of bones, because in the past old bones were burned in the bonfire. The ashes were taken the following morning and symbolically spread on the land for the fruitfulness of crops.” She recalled such bonfires from her rural childhood in Mayo and how “we would say a prayer around the fire with our parents and hold lighted furze (we called them whin) bushes high in the air as we cheered to our neighbours in unison yelling ‘up’ our own townland.”⁴

<http://feilenabealtaine.ie/home/> Dingle Peninsula, Kerry

<https://beltane.org/> Beltane Fire Festival, Edinburgh

¹ <https://blogs.transparent.com/irish/mayday-may-day-bealtaine/> For May Day, the custom was to make two fires, with a narrow path in between, through which the cattle were driven. Exactly why, hard to say, but presumably if your cows could make it through this narrow and dangerous path, you could also withstand whatever other harshness the future would present.

² bonfire *tine chnámh* (“bone fire”).

³ <https://irisharchaeology.ie/2011/05/mayday-and-bealtaine/>

⁴ <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/in-a-word-bone-fire-1.2269488>